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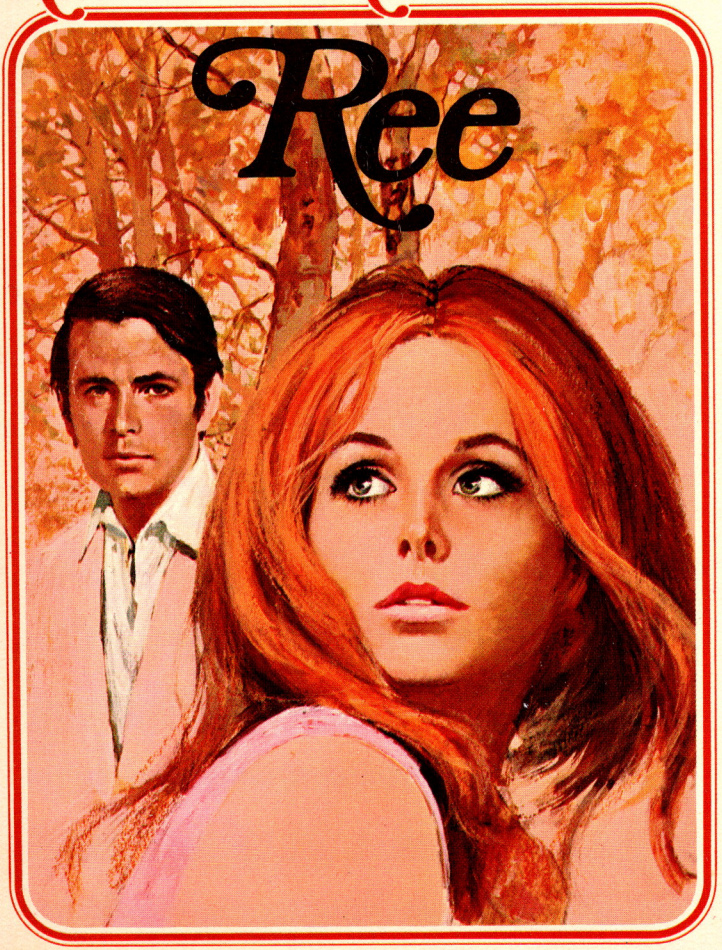
by the Bestselling Author of THE BRANDING IRON

Katharine Newlin Burt

Ree



HE STRODE VIGOROUSLY TOWARD HER

She ran, clung to him, spoke through her teeth. "I won't let you go. I won't. This time you shan't be able to go back. He won't be able to take you from me. You must fight him. You must fight him."

His arms were like a tender armor about her body and he bent his cheek to her hair, drew a deep breath and startled her by a question in a tone she had never heard from him before, thoughtful, pondering, purposeful, a man's voice. "Tell me, please, Sophie, who is . . . *he?*"

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Katharine Newlin Burt

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Chapter 1

Sophie Graeme ran down the Elderberry driveway in the rain. Her overalls and T-shirt clung to her body, her hair was glued to her temples and cheeks, her feet were bare, the toes digging into the wet sand as she ran. She had left her sandals on the front porch when she came out. She was as wild as flood water and as happy as the wind is free.

She had been wandering as usual in the Elderberry woods, where the rain storm had caught and driven her out to the open as a quicker path toward shelter. And she was smiling to herself because she had remembered Ree. It seemed to her that she had never known the feeling of loneliness in the Elderberry woods, but it must, nevertheless, have been loneliness that had created Ree, drawn him from the incomprehensible murmuring silence of the pines. Well, she had been a tiny creature in those days. Her mother,

a frail and delicate woman, had died in childbirth along with her infant son when Sophie was but a few years old. She'd had no playmates. Her father did not like her to bring home friends and even less to let her visit in their homes, and she had needed a big boy to help her climb up to the roof of that deserted shed and to help her mend the polliwog dam in the brook, which had broken, to let her captives escape. And she had needed a little boy to play with her at housekeeping in the summerhouse and to be a father to Raggedy Anne and Andy. She laughed, running, at the queer little name that child had invented for him.

It must have been this day's discovery of a child's lost tea set in the tumbledown summerhouse that had brought Ree back to memory. She had not thought of him in years. He had gradually been displaced as she had grown away from childhood and a child's needs and games. She wondered what he had looked like. He had been her alter ego, a big boy or a small, a chatterbox or a patient listener, and after his coming she had never again been afraid in the deserted woods . . . only with a forest fear, the ecstatic fear of Pan, perhaps, with its accompaniment of pipes and prancing hooves. But, for the other kind of fear, there was her home.

That little house, shadowed and root-embraced by its two chinaberry trees, was more like the shell of a crustacean than a human dwelling place. The fear lived in those little rooms, and it was embodied in her father. But it was not any fear she had of him, it was the contagion of his own fear of life for her and for himself, and as she came that day past the entrance gates of Elderberry, she slowed to a walk under the sluice of rain to reach the gate up a crescent lane sandy and rough between holly trees, berry bushes, wild honeysuckle, bordered on one side by the pine woods

and on the other by a meadow where Mr. Hildreth turned out his old hunters to grass.

Before she opened the door she took her sandals from their hiding place and put them with some difficulty on her damp and sandy feet. As she straightened, Hattie May came out of the door, and that child of wind and rain abruptly vanished.

"My Lord, Sophie, you're soppin' wet. If it weren't so warm you'd catch your death." Her face was sweet and round and black, and her smile motherly. "You just exactly the person I was wantin'," she went on, setting down her tote-bag and laying her gentle hand with the feel of a caress on Sophie's arm. "I was just hopin' I could persuade you to come up to the Mansion on Monday and lend me a hand with some of them coverin' sheets and puttin' up curtains and such. I need advice about arrangements. Big Sam, he promised to turn up—I'm scared to climb ladders myself, and he can move the heavy stuff and open up them big shutters—"

Sophie freed her paralyzed tongue. "Not Elderberry? You can't mean Elderberry!"

"Yes'm. Elderberry. The son come back."

"The one who—died in Africa?"

"Yes'm—only thing, he ain't dead. He was out expeditioning in one of them jungles you hear about and he come down with jungle fever, and all the no-account natives that was with him run off and left him for dead. But he got himself out of that jungle. Mr. Crewe says it was a miracle—and now here he comes or will be mighty soon, I reckon. That's what Mr. Crewe tells me when he come to engage me for this job of work, and how they expect one old lady to clean up a mess like that one . . ." She brightened. "But mebbe, honey, you goin' lend me a hand. My husband Sam says he goin' to fetch me a vac and help layin'

carpets and such. The stuff's on its way from storage, but everythin's always late. . . ."

"I certainly will help you, Hattie. But—Elderberry! Hattie, tell me, does Fa know?"

"Yes'm. I told him, wasn't goin' to leave that job to you. Honey, don't you open your eyes and look like that, chile, and go sort of pale. It ain't goin' to be that bad."

"But . . . Elderberry . . . Fa?"

"I know. I know. Right well I know. You just let the news sink in like . . . don't speak first . . . make like it's got no importance."

Sophie nodded dumbly and went in as Hattie left. In her bedroom she quietly and quickly changed into a cotton frock, toweled her hair, and combed it down. She looked absently at her reflection, not seeing in it the combination of gravity, eagerness, and willing laughter that was basically Celtic, as were the gray, well-lashed eyes, rather deep set between cheekbones and wide brows, the small, neat chin, slightly thrust forward, the mouth quick with its changes . . . the whole face with that beauty of mobility, above which the hair was fox-red, buoyant, and impatient of control.

She went into the kitchen, whose pots and pans were as much the tools of her day as Conrad Graeme's books and papers were of his, and there she set the kettle on the stove, sliced the bread thin, and arranged a tray. She dreaded the coming tea hour with the news of Elderberry's occupation hanging over them—for her a sorrowful loss, a narrowing of her already narrow life, for him she could not guess what sort of shock, what renewal of his obsessive fear of change. This stranger, this newcomer to the house of his last and—from the time of his mysterious retirement—his only friend, this would, she feared, bring on one of those

appalling headaches and the increase of that irrational dread. There were many things she did not know about Conrad Graeme. He was not a man to question, and at seventeen she had no experience of nervous illness and could get little advice from vague old Dr. Sempel.

As she left the kitchen for the living room, her father was coming along the hall. Her pity rushed to meet him as it always did, on a great wave of heartache and bewilderment. For he walked with lips compressed and pale, his eyes fixed like a man bleeding internally, resolute to conceal a mortal wound.

So, smiling dimly, he went past her and waited in the usual armchair for her to bring him the steaming cup and the thin slices of buttered bread. She was wondering how soon he would speak to her of Elderberry, and her heartbeat was uneven with suspense. The death of that last friend had snapped the fragile link between his wounded mind and the outside world. He had never again tried to open it to human intercourse. It was Harmon Elder who had first brought him to Little Sandy after the disaster and had installed him and his motherless little girl in a former gardener's cottage, leaving him the property, a small income for their support, and an extra legacy for the "education of Little Sophia." That Harmon owed her father some debt of gratitude she had guessed, and that it had to do with his disgrace and enforced resignation from the professorship in medieval history. Harmon had died when she was still small. She remembered him not too vividly but with affection. He had been a subdued kind man, deserted by his wife. Sometimes Sophie imagined that it was her father's dread of her hearing somewhere the story of his calamity that had kept them both cut off from the life of the small community. He had not deliberately curtailed her freedom

or forbidden her friendships, but his morbid dread of visitors, and her own pride fostered by this upbringing, had made any informal or continuous relationship with her contemporaries almost impossible. It was not, she thought, that she was disliked, or that these young people consciously visited upon her any resentment of Dr. Graeme's haughty-seeming exclusiveness, but that they found her different, realized that she knew little of their ways and could not readily understand them. It was hardly worth their while to break down her aloofness. No doubt they spoke of her as sort of queer, a square.

She had brought tea this afternoon to the window seat at her father's elbow, and presently, unable to bear her suspense, she ignored Hattie May's suggestion.

"Hattie," she said, not looking at him and speaking low, "is opening Elderberry."

He held his cup arrested and gave her above it, as she glanced up, a wide, blank look. His delicate, hurt face tightened. "Elderberry . . ." he said, and set down his cup. Then he went on, probing her face with near-sighted blue eyes as though to assure himself of her identity before betraying his own knowledge. "Hattie May has already given me the news, and I have heard it too from Mr. Crewe by telephone. The son—" He stopped as though he had come to the end of a prepared speech.

Relief made her draw in a quick breath. "Is he—the one—?"

Conrad seemed to make an effort, left his cup on the tray, and tightened his hands on the arms of his chair. They looked like storm-beaten white birds, she fancied. And he went on in the same carefully prepared fashion. Perhaps, like Sophie, he had been dreading this interview. Nothing with him was ever natural or spontaneous.

"The son was given to his mother after the divorce. He was very young, and Harmon no doubt thought he would need a mother's care. She took him with her to Africa. He was, I suppose, brought up in the Research Center. She had fallen in love with this Englishman and Harmon gave her a divorce. The son was supposed to have died of an epidemic fever as both his mother and stepfather had died. This man who has arrived in Little Sandy has the necessary qualifications and in fact is physically, I am told, a definite Elder type. Mr. Crewe gave me the particulars. Because of the old association and the history—of—of this bit of property, he seemed to think it necessary. If you remember Harmon Elder you may see for yourself a resemblance if or when you meet this—Duncan."

"Duncan? Was that the name of Mr. Elder's younger brother too—the one who was an instructor at the university? I think I remember *him*. Tall. He used to put me on his shoulder to make me 'grow up quick.' He was, I thought, like some picture over the mantel . . . Sir Galahad?"

Conrad spoke hurriedly, interrupting her. "No. No. That was not the brother's name. Duncan, the son, appeared in Mr. Crewe's office a short time ago, but left at once to collect his belongings or whatever. I believe he is bringing a manservant. I don't know when he will be moving in. . . . Will you take away the tea things now, please? I think there is nothing more I can add to this. I feel . . . I must get back to work."

"I wish you'd rest now. You've been at it for hours."

"You forget. I went out to the post office. But . . . I won't be long. It's just . . ." His voice faded out as he moved down the hall to his sanctuary.

Chapter 2

The next day being Sunday and Hattie May not working, Sophie decided to trespass for a last wistful time on the Elderberry estate. She went from the kitchen garden to the hidden stile that she used for her truancy from that ugly stepmother, Reality. And as she stepped down into the sun-tattered woods she shed her Little Sandy self. For here, it seemed, she was released from the anxious watchfulness of her father and even from the paternal watchfulness of the Reverend Benton's God. Here she was part of a world forgotten by the conscious mind of man. Even the stars, when sometimes she stole out late into the woods, were hieroglyphs above the crooked branch-runes of the pines. This world had no more meaning than a child's or an animal's. She was freed from explanations, from theories, from thought, from past and future. She was neither man nor woman, child nor

daughter—oh, not a daughter!—she was not Sophie Graeme. She had no name. She did not know or care what she was or what she was not.

Here in this country of long-leaved pines the earth was blanketed by fallen needles salmon in color, which by contrast gave a purple tint to the trunks that rose, branchless, almost to the height of a royal palm before they held out their soot-black crooked limbs. The needles lay fourfold on the sand, the sand on red clay. It was a soundless floor; even the quick animals that crossed it from tree to tree, from hole to hole, were inaudible. Human footsteps did not exist. Here she was bodiless. The wind, when it moved, lifted her fox-red hair as it did the quivering iridescent pine needles, which grew in their twelve-inch lengths in clumps magically and eternally exact, holding each season a waxen candle which later became a tight purple cone. This swelled, darkened to copper, then to russet, and having fallen, in due course ended black and shriveled on the earth as she must end, as life must end—voiceless, unexplained, inexplicable. How wonderful, she thought, was life without explanation, its every breath, to the last breath of all, a magic and a mystery. So she moved silently, not the wild child of yesterday but slow and grave and full of pensive thought.

It was a clear day, warm and still. She found her way to the little brook and up the slope beyond, past the Raggedy Anne summerhouse and so to the garden, scrambling up with no help from an imaginary Ree by the brick coping to the garden behind what Hattie May called the Mansion. In the tangled garden roses still managed to bloom, and down an unweeded path she found her way to a smooth part of the coping and sat there, her back to the blind house to face a distance blue between the walls of pine. The forest ex-

tended forever across the rippled land, unbroken here even by the open patches of tobacco or peach orchard.

The town of Big Sandy twenty miles away beyond a low range of sand hills was not visible from the Elderberry garden. Its vapors did not stain the unbroken blue. Little Sandy, bypassed by the north-south highway and the north-south railroad, having no tourist trade, thought little of its tourist attractions. In a very small way it was a tobacco town, sending its quota of leaves to the auctions, and had once planned and hoped for a boom in peaches. In this it had been cheated by a state farther south which had deftly preempted an earlier market, so that Little Sandy was sadly girdled by neglected orchards. But it was drowsily resigned to its condition except for its youth, the more intelligent and ambitious of whom had escaped. There were left the less able, condemned to a stagnant pool muddy with damned and restless life.

Of all this life, far or near, Elderberry that afternoon was innocent, when Sophie sat for perhaps the last time on the garden coping and looked across a world that seemed her own. Beside her hand a lizard glittered, paused, displayed the rosy little banner at his throat, and twinkled himself out of sight. A conscientious robin, father of a belated brood, strutted and paused amongst the grassy bricks, a cardinal painted his flight from earth to branch. The season of tumultuous song was over. With the birds, the lizard, and the roses, Sophie contributed a hazy human reverie to the summer afternoon.

A creaking sound turned her bodily and consciously toward the house. A flight of steps led to a pillared balcony under which, through a broken latticework, the windows of the ground floor were dustily visible. Midway along the shadowed wall a door had sagged open from a rusted hinge. It might never have been

locked, she thought, and squeezed herself through the narrow opening. She might not again have a chance to find herself alone inside of Elderberry.

She was in some sort of a storeroom for wood or coal or household supplies, and up a few steps, to her left, there was another door. This swung open on its spring hinge and she went into a huge old-fashioned kitchen, dimly visible, its coal range, its ice box, its big sink, tables, chairs, cupboards, all empty. Through another door she could see a row of laundry tubs. Impossible to forbear further exploration. She went up a flight of stairs, feeling her way with a hand against a plaster wall, into an enormous paneled dining room. Here the sun, through shutters, streaked across mahogany, pied the dusty buffalo head above the sideboard. The big table and high-backed chairs were covered in muslin, as were the pictures. Rugs and draperies had been stored elsewhere. A house, empty for many years, is always haunted. Its very lack of human occupation leaves room for fear of less earthy, less reasonable presences.

On rubber soles Sophie dared to cross the room and from it stepped into a long, wide hall. She was a child again, keyed for flight at a movement or a sound. Her pulses were not even. So when, just one foot above the dark bare floor, a youth bright against the paneled wall confronted her, her heart stopped and a haze filled her eyes.

And from somewhere deep down in her consciousness that name was spoken . . . *Ree.*

In an instant he would speak. She turned to run away and saw the portrait; its reflection had confronted her in a tall mirror, the protecting sheet having fallen. She drew a deep breath and mocked herself with laughter, a hand on her heart. The youth in the portrait was one of the Elder family, of course. What in

heaven's name was the mater with her? Ree . . . again. Ree . . . here in Elderberry.

She went to look up into the face. It was a pale, thin face, level hazel eyes under strong brows. He was half smiling. *Ree might have looked like that,* she thought, *and he'd be just this age now . . . a little older than I am.* She'd never known what he wore, but this casual summer stuff would be just right. He'd be ready to run about with her, tear through the thick brush where the ground underfoot was too damp for pine growth, wade and climb. He wouldn't be pretty, she thought, but for a boy he's interesting to look at, handsome perhaps. She wished that he could speak. He looked as if he wanted to. . . . That smile!

She turned again to the mirror and there they stood together—the portrait being set into the paneling increased the illusion of his reality. It was as though she had entered into another world. She put her hand out doubtfully and his mirrored hand seemed to meet it. It was a strange experience, impossible to describe or to explain. A meeting in a fourth dimension between two disembodied spirits, children or ghosts. *For, in a fashion,* she thought, *we are ghosts in childhood, the spirits that come into the world and only slowly take on human habiliments.* The boy who had run and played with her in the woods was a spirit friend and comrade, someone that had now come again to her need as though she had called him, rebelling against the loss of her half-mystic freedom in the woods. He had appeared to reassure her. She was not to be an exile, for now he was Elderberry, and she would be welcome there.

For an unrecorded time she stood in this half-wistful trance, over and above and beneath which, perhaps, her awareness of reality maintained itself and she knew that she was fanciful, was ready to accuse herself of

childish make-believe. But the illusion comforted her, as a hurt child may be comforted by the telling of a fairy tale.

Faithful to her promise, Sophie went up to Elderberry to help Hattie May. She was actually of no great use, but she did contribute advice and opened some of the enormous cartons that had arrived from storage. Big Sam mounted ladders and moved heavy articles of furniture. There were hundreds of books to be unpacked, but she left them to the heir. The linen she did lay out on its shelves in the vast linen room upstairs, and she was able to select what seemed to her the appropriate floor for a rug or the right window for a pair of curtains. For the rest she wandered about the house. Before she left to go home for tea, she would stop in the hall and look up at the portrait of the Elder boy, who seemed to be her smiling host. And on the way home through the woods or down the drive she would walk slowly with the reflection of that smile upon her mouth and the comfortable feeling of conversation with some old, familiar friend.

So she was strolling along in her dream fashion on one of these afternoons. Men had been working on the driveway, leveling and smoothing the gravel. Mr. Crewe had evidently received generous instructions, and the sight of this activity changed her mood, so that, forgetting Ree, she began to notice the beautiful lights and shadows of the afternoon.

A horseman on a fast trot came from behind her around a curve; his animal at the sudden sight of her white dress—for she was not in overalls that day—reared, wheeled, and leaped up the bank, steep on either side of the road. Sophie was as startled, cried out, and sprang away up her own bank, grasping a tree to steady herself and to delay her flight, for her ad-

miration had been caught by an exhibition of horsemanship. She knew the rider by sight and by not-very-savory reputation. It was Blaise LeClerc, the young man who worked in some nebulous capacity for Mr. Hildreth and lived with his mother in the rich "damn Yankee's" gatehouse. He moved easily with the erratic movements of his mount, murmuring, coaxing, mastering, getting her down into the driveway and taking her on a fast run along it, the fresh gravel spattering at her heels. A moment later he was back at a quiet walk and dismounted just below her, looking up. She had left her tree and slid down almost to his level, reassured, and abashed by her girlish outcry and panic flight. But she was even more aware of admiration. "You can ride," she said. "I mean . . . I don't know a thing about it, but it seems to me marvelous that she didn't throw you off."

Blaise stood with the reins over his arm, tall and narrow in riding clothes, his dark face only a trifle flushed. "She wasn't half trying," he said, speaking not in the least like a town boy or indeed like any of the few young people she had known. He had a quick staccato way with his words, unaccented, she thought it like the smile he tossed up to her and withdrew like a gambler's coin doubtfully risked. "I've been taking it out of her for a couple of hours and she just wanted to show me she had plenty of zing left." He added with a darting look like his smile, "You ought to be a good horsewoman, Sophie Graeme. . . ." He knew her name! "I bet you'd have the hands and the seat."

"Me? I've never been on horseback in my life."

He looked at her again with that gambler's air. "Why don't you go out with me? It'd be a real service to Dan—that's Hildreth—and there's a little gelding, Luke—this one's Lucy—just right for a girl and quiet. There's no end of saddles."

Sophie had now come down all the way to his level and was stroking Lucy's nose, having approached very quietly and lifted a slow hand, so that the horse lowered that exquisite head and let the thick lids drop over her brilliant eyes.

"Wouldn't I love to, Blaise!" He had used her name, why not use his? she thought. *We know each other even if we haven't been introduced.* Sophie was not shy. She had been saved from that sort of self-consciousness by her long, anxious hovering over her father. And she was not vain. There had been no feverish competition in her aloof existence. She was afraid for her father sometimes, rarely for herself. "My father would be frantic. He thinks there's danger for me around every corner."

Rapid blood ran up into his face, which puzzled her. She had not meant danger from him, and it could not occur to him that anyone would be afraid of horses. She hurried on, "He's not well, you know." His face changed as rapidly and to her as incomprehensibly. "So I mustn't worry him."

"May I walk home with you? You are going home?"

"Of course." She laughed, and his eyes seemed to enjoy her laughter. In fact she had never before had anyone look at her with such a darting, hungry admiration. "We're going the same way so you can hardly escape me, unless you get up on Lucy and run. How did you get into the Elderberry place with Lucy? The wood gate's barred, and there's a chain across the front entrance."

"Lucy took a fence. I'm trespassing."

"So am I. You know that Mr. Elder is coming back to live here?"

"Yes. Bonnie Lou told me. Bonnie Lou Hicks."

"You know Bonnie well, don't you?"

"Who doesn't?" he said carelessly. Then, "I've never

been inside that house and I don't suppose I'll ever be invited."

Sophie had an impulse based on his curious, almost surly conviction of being forever excluded from Elderberry. It made him a partner in her approaching exile. "Would you like to see it? Before he comes? I've been going up every day to help Hattie. She's cleaning, a black woman, very old friend of mine. I love her. She'd let you in with me. It's really something to see—a big old house, not typically southern but really quite impressive. I haven't, of course, seen any house like it." A listener was rare wine to Sophie's natural friendliness, which always waited in pride for a first gesture of encouragement. She could not guess how long he had been watching her and wanting to meet her and to talk and to offer this encouragement.

"Why not now, if she's still there?"

"I can't—Fa will be wanting his tea."

His eyes suggested, "Ask me in," but though she understood the look she ignored it resolutely, the probable effect on her father of such a visitor as this one passing before her mind, so that she blinked and pressed her lips together. Evidently he recognized something like a snub but took it manfully. She thought he had experienced other such wounds.

To soften her omission she asked quickly. "You take out Mr. Hildreth's horses? He hunts, doesn't he? With the Big Sandy hounds? And I've seen you driving his car."

"And I keep his accounts and pay his bills and mix cocktails and help entertain his guests. There's always a houseful up there. . . ." He jerked his head in the general direction of Red Hill, the old McCulloch place which had been purchased by Hildreth several years ago. She was for some reason astonished by this sudden confidence.

"You're really like a son, aren't you?" she asked unthinkingly, and was even more astonished by the result of this question, for Blaise began to speak fast, not looking at her, and she realized that her use of the word "son" had cut through some protective shell.

"I'm not his son, Sophie, though you'll hear that said about me . . . and worse, I expect." Here he shot a side glance at Sophie's innocent and interested face and hurried on as though he were in haste to make use of an unexpected opportunity. "My mother was a widow when Dan—that's Hildreth, of course—first knew her. That was in Jamaica. My father was a planter and died broke. Mamma"—this sounded quaint to Sophie—"supported herself and me dressmaking in Kingston. I don't know how she and Dan met—I reckon he just caught sight of her and she smiled at him and that was enough. She was beautiful, still is. Someday I'd like to take you to see her . . . if you'd care to." Sophie murmured, "Of course I would," and then with a much greater start she heard what he next said in a hurried staccato fashion. "She was his mistress, that's the fact." He was looking straight ahead of him as they walked slowly down the drive, stopping every few steps for some emphatic phrase. There was a deepening of color in his face. "He brought her up to the States when I was five or six years old. We lived in Brooklyn but traveled all over the world—just used the Brooklyn place as a *pied-à-terre*. Dan had a wife, married him for his money—society type, which of course Dan isn't. She treated him like nothing human, and he had to pay a thumping sum to get rid of her. Then he'd have married Mamma, but she developed T.B.—yes, that's why we came here. Dan sent her to the sanatorium in Big Sandy. It's famous for the dry air—pines, that sort of thing. But because of her sickness she wouldn't marry him. He fixed up the gatehouse

at Red Hill for her and me, but I'm up at his house a lot. He gave me a business course so I could take care of his accounts and correspondence. I've a good head for figures. One of those things you're born with, I guess. Mamma sleeps out in a screened porch, spends most of her days there too. She was dismissed from the sanatorium, not cured but what they call an arrested case. Dan's been damn good to me. He gave me my education—everything—as though I had been his son. I damn well wish I was."

Never before had Sophie received so frank, so exotic, so revealing a confidence. She was shocked, amazed, and embarrassed, but moved too by sympathy, for there were anger and a sort of desperation about him. And she was touched by his desire to defend himself from what she had in fact heard about him and his guardian and his mother, Bonnie being her informant.

They had left Elderberry by the time he came to his rather husky final words, Blaise having paused to jump Lucy over the chain and to come to his feet again beside her when she had stepped across it. They turned into her crescent lane, reached her gate without further speech. It was as though a storm had suddenly stopped. She did not know what to say but thought that he saw in her face the sympathy that was stronger than the shock, for he seemed to be content with silence.

When Sophie turned to say good-bye he did speak. "What time do you go up to that house?"

"About three o'clock, usually."

"I'll pick you up here tomorrow." And before she could agree or disagree he tossed her that gambler's coin of a smile, swung to his saddle, and was gone.

It was natural that she should be excited by this small adventure, the first one of its kind in all her summers. But Sophie, besides, was shaken out of her aloofness to a real emergency. For what use could she

make of the tossed smile, the quick glance, the astonishing revelations, the whole tempestuous intrusion that had clawed at the thorny hedge about her privacy with a marauder's intensity of purpose?

There was in reality some reason for her nervousness. Blaise LeClerc was not and could not be Fa's choice of a friend for his daughter. Even of Bonnie Lou Hicks he disapproved, thinking her a foolish little creature, rather on the bold side, and "underbred." Long ago Sophie had of necessity made up her mind that if she were to have any life of her own at all, she would have to keep any small social activities, if not secret, at least in an area somewhat unexplored by Conrad Graeme. For his own protection and, almost, for her surviving sanity. Like all brave young creatures she believed, and with more reason than most, that she was better able to take care of herself than he could be. Her role had always been the taking care of him. Without that half-loving near-deception her whole character, her very life, would be deformed, like the head of a savage infant by the stone bound to its skull. If she gave in to her father's morbid fears she would be gradually forced to share them, to dread the secret that preyed upon his memory, to watch and to wait for some threat of discovery or shame. Even Dr. Sempel was aware of her predicament, and advised her in his gentle mumble to go her own way, not to settle down to an old maid daughter's slavery.

So in spite of her apprehension, making no pretense, for she was determined to brave any chance of discovery as she had braved out her friendship with Bonnie Lou, she went down to her gate the following afternoon, and as she did so a great car like some splendid sea animal swam to a stop before it.

Blaise was out and around and at its door, she was beside him, and they drove quietly away. She did not

even think to wonder at his air of unspoken collusion, but later understood that he must have been well aware of what her father would have felt about this acquaintanceship. Blaise knew Bonnie and Bonnie had a discursive tongue. She would have told him of Sophie's imprisonment and the peril of Professor Graeme's dogwatch.

Blaise turned upon her for an instant an enigmatic face, then looked straight ahead as he guided the car down the lane and out into the road. They exchanged a smile, no other greeting.

As they reached the Elderberry entrance he asked, astonishing her by his perspicacity, "Why are you so excited about this Elder, anyway?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . just someone . . . a neighbor." It was not possible for her to emulate the fullness and rapidity of his own confidences. "The place has been empty so long. I really don't even remember old Mr. Elder very well."

"Was he very old? Then probably his son . . ." He kept looking at her and away.

"I thought of him as a Methuselah—children are like that—but he couldn't have been more than fifty or even under. Fa was older than Mr. Elder. Here we are, They've taken away the chain."

The driveway was beautifully trimmed and raked. They drew up before the tall house front, its pillared circular porch protecting a vast door, on either side of which were heavy, narrow panes of glass. In a moment they were in the hall, a wide staircase going up before them into the dimness of the second story. Hattie May, Sam in tow, welcomed them. She apologized for not being at liberty to show them around but told them to make themselves at home.

With this liberal permission, Sophie took Blaise all

over the house. Downstairs into a study with wide windows and deep windowsills, into a library with its waiting bookshelves, along the formal living room in which the furniture—heavy mahogany—dingy oil paintings, huge oriental rugs, a fireplace, sofas, tables, knick-knacks, created a thoroughly depressing atmosphere. Then upstairs, even into a dusty attic full of boxes and old trunks which didn't keep them long, though Blaise said, "I'd like to look into them. You'd look wonderful in some old wedding dress. There'd be one, you know, wrapped up in sheets and things—little white satin slippers and white silk stockings with lace clocks. Even you would have to lace in your waist, Sophie." On the second floor, Sophie said, "This is going to be his bedroom. They've got it pretty well fixed up. What a bed!" "Fit for a triangle," said Blaise, to which she gave no ear, and going over to a window, he observed that there was a balcony convenient for an escaping lover. Sophie, after looking into the deep closets and the enormous old-fashioned bathroom, "It's sort of grim, isn't it?" she decided. "But handsome. Oh, Blaise, you must see the kitchen and its getting late. I'll have to hurry."

They had taken longer than she knew. Sunset light was red against the wall as they came to the stairhead. She hurried on, looking back and up at a view of golden clouds above the pine tops beautifully framed in a window of the upper hall. So that she slipped on one of the freshly polished steps and went, half running, half falling, down into the hall almost to the feet of a tall man who stood there looking up. He must have stepped out from the library at the sound of their voices, but it seemed to Sophie that he had shot up from the floor.

She was greatly embarrassed, the more so because he

made no movement and no sound, not smiling as he looked down at her with ice-gray eyes in a regular, colorless face. He seemed to tower above her, not so much in his actual tall inches as in authority and stateliness. He would be not only master of this house but of everyone that entered it, to a degree never before felt by her for anyone. His eyes or the calm, assured intelligence behind them half paralyzed her tongue, which stammered, "I'm sorry . . . I'm Sophie Graeme. I'm a neighbor. This is my friend, Blaise LeClerc. You're Mr. Elder, aren't you?"

"Yes." He had a cool and even voice, pitched low.

Blaise spoke from a face as red as Sophie's but striving obviously for a pose of nonchalance. "I'm afraid, sir, we've been taking advantage of your absence to explore. We had Hattie's permission. She knows Miss Graeme. It was my fault. I'd never been into this—er—marvelous house before. It's been empty so long that I guess we here in Little Sandy have got into the habit of thinking of it . . . well—er—as a sort of institution . . . like a museum. I'm sorry, sir."

"There is no need, Mr. LeClerc."

Sophie said almost as pitifully as a scared child. "We haven't touched a thing."

He bowed. "I believe you. Would you care to look over the library with me? There are about a hundred boxes of books that have been in storage. I shall be moving in on Monday if Hattie can make a place for me and my few belongings. The arrangement of details will take some time."

They followed the tall man into the room—trees pressed closely against its tall, deep-silled panes—and stood beside him as he gestured to the empty shelves. Before they left the hall Sophie, behind his back, had pointed out to Blaise the portrait. Duncan Elder might

have sat for it. He had the long gray eyes, the strong brows, the thin face. But he was certainly many years older than this youth. There was no half-smile of amusement or of mischief on his mouth. The face was still and regular almost to rigidity.

"Phew!" said Blaise when they were safely on their way down the drive. "This was pretty ghastly, wasn't it? Was my face red!"

Sophie murmured absently. "He's very handsome, isn't he? Distinguished."

Blaise did not answer for several minutes, then he spoke with vehemence. "I hate him. I hate his looks and his voice and his eyes and his hands—he's like an iceberg. There's something dangerous about him. Don't go making too much of a neighbor out of him, Sophie. I'm warning you."

She said nothing to this startling outburst, and her silence seemed to offend him. He flushed, looked fixedly ahead of him, and without saying another word, brought her to her gate. Here he made what seemed to her a rather elaborate ceremony of getting her out of the car, escorting her to her door, and murmuring good-bye and thanks so much for everything. He did not suggest another meeting. She was relieved but a shade disappointed, and rather ashamed of yesterday's intense excitement.

But none of these sensations interfered with her much stronger preoccupation with Duncan Elder. The only reason she had not responded to Blaise's brief explosion was that her own impressions of the man were both so overwhelming and so confused. She had indeed been repelled by his cold hand pressure—not so much a pressure as a brief folding of stiff long fingers about hers—and by the ice-brightness of his eyes. His speech seemed to her like that of a man who had

recently acquired a foreign language and was using it with care and literary precision. The whole man was as hieroglyphic as her stars above the crooked branches of the pines. She was uncomfortable, remembering in what a chill silence he had stood to wait for their confession and apology. He had not smiled. Not once had he smiled during the whole interview—not with his lips, not even with his eyes.

But this would not have made her unsympathetic with Blaise's warning. She even felt that it was in some measure justified, and that she might do well to avoid any further development of neighborliness. But there was something else . . . she could not put an exploratory finger upon it. There seemed to be no name for her reaction. Almost she fancied, coming as close to definition as she could, there seemed to be a groping need . . . of rescue . . . of compassion? Where had she gathered such an impression? Out of the air? Surely not in that commanding and self-assured personality. No one could have appeared less desirous of such a womanish service. It was irrational and ridiculous from someone like her, young, inexperienced, ignorant of his character and history.

Restless and unhappy, unreasonably discomposed, she lay awake for hours that night, seeing through the branches a light that seemed to swing slowly with their drowsy motion. And when she slept she dreamed that a man stood outside her window. She thought it must be Duncan Elder asking her for some information, but at the same time she knew that it was a dream figure and told herself not to be afraid. But when he reached a hand to move the curtain she woke herself with a cry. It was certainly a breath of wind in the curtain, and Mr. Duncan Elder, tall and masterful and utterly detached, was certainly not occupying his loneliness

that night with any thought of Sophie Graeme. And then she smiled, remembering that he was not even at Elderberry, but staying somewhere else to move in next Monday. Perhaps he had installed a servant in that high, lighted room to be caretaker of his new property.

Chapter 3

Conrad Graeme was occasionally able to surprise his daughter greatly, rarely more so than when, on another afternoon of that memorable month, he came out of his bedroom-study long before the tea hour and passed the kitchen door. There was no need now for her visits to Elderberry. Hattie had done her job and Mr. Elder's manservant had taken over all the household work. "He's an African and mighty tall," said Hattie softly, and seemed unable or unwilling to amplify this description. Sophie was driven to a long overdue cleaning up of her own workshop.

Conrad went by the door rather surreptitiously, she thought, but she saw him before he could make his getaway. He wore a clean shirt, a neat tie, a blue tropical worsted coat, and a pair of flannel slacks. There

was a Panama hat on his head and he was carrying a cane.

She ran out. "Fa . . . ?"

He stopped and bent upon her a resolute eye. "I am going to call upon our neighbor," he said. "He is, after all, the son of an old friend and"—with a quaint and humble bend of the head—"our benefactor. He has been at Elderberry for a fortnight. I shall have to miss our tea hour, but will be back for supper."

"May I . . . I mean, would you like me to go with you?"

"No. No. That wouldn't be the thing at all. There's no lady of the house. I understand that he is a bachelor. Only a manservant. It would not be at all the thing."

And out he went, stepping more briskly than usual, holding himself straight and looking tall and distinguished. She was afraid of this venture for his unstable nervous system. To climb over the long-neglected stile, to follow that familiar trail, to return to the house of scholarly delight and easy friendliness and to find there a different man . . . the cold eyes, the cold hand, the unsmiling mouth!

She returned to her work anxiously, grateful for its detailed distractions. The time passed. She wished that Bonnie Lou would run in, coming, as she would, to the back door, half timid, half amused, looking all about her for "the dragon." She was so pretty, whatever she did, with her demure brown eyes and her inviting secretive mouth. So different from Sophie, though the two girls were almost of the same height and build, as Sophie had reason to know, their acquaintance having begun with a mutual desire for a certain dress in Hart's Drygood store window. Bonnie had surrendered it to Sophie because the color matched her hair, "sort

of red-russet," but conflicted with her own complexion. The salesgirl emphatically supporting this contention, Bonnie herself insisted upon bringing it to Sophie's house and so had forced her gay, inquisitive entrance.

It was very much later than the tea hour, that afternoon of the professor's venture, when he returned and startled Sophie half out of her wits by the extraordinary effect of his visit to Elderberry.

She heard the gate click and through her window saw him coming up the path, and it seemed to her that the last glow of sunset—for he was late even for supper—must be upon him, so brightened was his face. She had never seen him look like this before, having no memory of him in the time of his happiness when her mother was alive and when he was honored and, in a narrow, scholarly fashion, beginning to be known for his papers and lectures upon the Renaissance period in Italy.

He stood for a moment on the porch looking back, as though to emphasize a memory, then came into the dim hall.

Sophie lit the candles on the dining table. She hardly dared to question him lest she shatter this delicate aura of a new experience. He left his hat and stick and came to the table, smiling up at her as she placed the food before him. His flushed face looked younger by a dozen years.

"I had an interesting visit," he said, when she had taken her place opposite him. Even his voice sounded fuller, younger, though the particular, precise fashion of his speech remained, was even emphasized. "The library is being carefully catalogued and arranged. Elder is unusually intelligent and extremely personable."

"I thought he was handsome," she carefully agreed,

as though afraid of scaring off a bird that had alighted on her shoulder.

"We have at last a neighbor," he went on, "and I do believe . . . a friend." Here he paused, savoring the word, and his eyes rested on her as through a rosy mist.

"Did you think he was like Mr. Harmon, Fa?" she asked, anxious, for some reason, to interrupt the panegyric.

He blinked, smiled, and shook his head. "Oh no, no, not like Harmon, but nevertheless a genuine Elder type. He resembles his father only in the sense of rapprochement I felt between us, based, of course, upon nothing in the past—" Here he stopped with a jerk, as though someone had pressed a hand upon his arm, but hurried on again. "Rather an innate congeniality. Even his speech, meticulous, beautiful, rhythmic, so exquisitely unlike our modern American sloppiness."

"You didn't think he was sort of . . . cold . . . and very formal? To me he talked like a foreigner unfamiliar with English."

"Ah!" This was an exclamation of mysterious satisfaction. "That he is! A foreigner of foreigners—from a dark continent. His manner of speech gives him great distinction. And his air."

"I thought he was stiff . . . perhaps a little forbidding . . . for a young man."

"No. No. No. It is sincere. It is due to the poise of an essential aristocrat, an intellectual, interested in one's mind, one's spiritual and mental processes . . . impersonal, a mind, one might say, mathematical in its purity, in its precision. Yes . . . a young man . . . a young man, but so much more than that." Here he paused, and his eyes widened upon the flushed girl-face across the table from him as though he were seeing her for the first time. But Sophie had flushed because she

had only that instant realized that she had never told him of her meeting with Duncan and she could not understand why he had not been puzzled by this omission. But he went on with almost a mischievous or teasing air. "He thought, Sophie, that you were beautiful."

Her face burned more deeply. "He told you . . . ?"

"That you had come to see the house with a young man, a lad, it was, that works for Hildreth. He offered you, I suppose, a lift. Blaise LeClerc—is that his name? Not my choice of an acquaintance for you, Sophie, and certainly a strange introducer for your meeting with our neighbor. But, of course, you are aware of that. I can see that you have the sense to be somewhat mortified. Your mother was a gentlewoman—the word is out of use but it applies—a Virginia gentlewoman. This boy seems to be a chauffeur."

"Not that, Fa."

"No matter. No matter." Blaise was obliterated as by the passage of an eraser across a child's blackboard failure. "He is of no importance. There are, I know, very few people here whose association with a daughter of mine . . . well, well . . . this Duncan, this son of Harmon's, is from a far country. He knows nothing of our background here, nothing of our histories. He knows only of that great friendship between his father and myself. He has—a respect for it, and in spite of the difference in our ages, will endeavor to renew, to build up again, that intercourse between Elderberry and our little hideout here."

Sophie had never thought of her home as a hideout and the expression seemed strange on his lips, but somehow the name clicked into a vacancy of definition that was fairly startling. She looked up quickly and met his shining, absent gaze. "It is like a rebirth.

I have great hopes." It was a word foreign to her ears.

"Of what? Of what exactly, Fa?"

To which he made no direct reply but went on vaguely about the freedom of that wonderful library, the help he had been requested to give in the arrangement of the books, the young man's interest in Sophie. She could not help but see what was in his mind, and when she came close to take away his plate and he put his arms around her and looked up into her face with proud excitement, it was as though he said aloud: "For me—a son—the son of my lost desire."

He let her go and she went kitchenwards bearing her tray, and did not know whether to laugh or scream or cry.

In spite of her original excitement over the meeting with Blaise LeClerc, Sophie had not been thinking of him. But he must have been present in her inner mind, for she was not at all startled when only a few days later, on her way to the library with an armful of books, that car drew to its soft stop beside her.

"Let me give you a lift," said Blaise. "That's a load."

With his characteristic quick and expert motions he was near her, capturing the books, opening the door, and she found herself again beside him as they moved away.

"Hot, isn't it?" said Blaise. "Are you in a hurry?"

She shook her head, looking at him through her eyelashes. Already she felt something like the thrill of picking up an adventure story that she had begun, then forgotten or mislaid.

"I'll take you for a spin. Nothing like speed for a hot day." He lowered the top of the car by pressing a button, and with that, turning from her lane into the highway, they left the little sultry town behind them and went streaming out into the countryside. Her hair

tugged coolly at its roots, baring her brows; she had to throw back her head and half close her eyes against the pressure of the flowing air upon her lids. Her thin blouse billowed and unglued itself from her hot breasts.

"How's the neighbor?" demanded Blaise, his Egyptian profile set against speed.

"I haven't seen him. Fa called on him and he's very happy about it all. Elderberry's open again and he'll be able to go up to the library and spend hours over those books. It's wonderful."

"And you?"

"I don't come into it."

"So far, so good. Keep it up. He's a prematurely aged critter—not our contemporary. But all the same, I thing Mrs. Hicks has her feelers out for him."

"Mrs. Hicks? Bonnie's mother? What on earth for?"

"Husband for that little gadabout, of course."

"Don't you like Bonnie?"

"Oh, I love her madly. So do we all of us."

"I don't like the way you say that. She's my friend."

"I'm sorry . . . darling." This he said in a curious singsong fashion and laid his dark hand for an instant on her knee. "I'll be careful. I swear I will." But there was nothing careful in the quick dark look or the quick dark touch or the glitter of his smile.

They came to a high hill and stopped under a wide-branched tree to look at that enormous view, those acres of dark pine. They talked about themselves and each other, the sort of talk she had never had with anyone before, as unfamiliar as strong drink and as exciting. When she talked, Blaise was an excellent listener. He seemed almost physically to absorb her words, his eyes darting to and from her face. By the time they got back to Little Sandy, the library was closed and she was

late for tea. It was only Fa's own late return from Elderberry that saved her. And before she went into the "hideout" she felt that she knew Blaise LeClerc, for all his strangeness, better than anyone she had talked to before in all her life, except, perhaps—and she laughed at the absurdity of this—except perhaps for . . . *Ree*!

Chapter 4

Fa's almost daily visits to Elderberry, for he had been given the freedom of the library, gave Sophie a freedom of her own. Even the sacred tea hour was neglected. Sherry and crackers were served to him by Peter, the manservant, whether Duncan was at home or not. Peter had been sent from the Research Center to meet Duncan at the African port to accompany him to the States. Peter had waited patiently there for the belated appearance of the desperate traveler.

"Duncan is fortunate in his acquisition of this man," said Fa. "He is highly educated, and he has a superior dignity and grace. It seems that he can do anything."

"And what does Duncan do?" she asked, being perversely irritated, in spite of her gratitude for the change Duncan had brought in Fa's life, by the constant paean.

"Didn't I tell you? He is a naturalist. He is interested

in research and goes about daily and often at night with his gloves and his trowel, his field glasses and his pouch for specimens. He has taken over Harmon's study, the room beyond the dining room, for a laboratory. The place is half filled with these specimens."

"What kind of specimens?"

"Plants chiefly, as far as I can tell. They stand in little pots along the window seat which he uses for a table. Some in the sun, some carefully shaded, all watched and watered and fed like so many invalids or infants. Ah, scholarship . . . research . . . a gift of the gods. It is a pity that so few members of your sex . . ." And he sighed and shrugged, giving Sophie a glance of indulgent pity. "The little boy that died . . ." she felt him murmuring to his disappointed hopes, "*he* would have understood."

Life has been monotonously compared to a river, but to Sophie a river seemed an escaping prisoner, bank-manacled and running toward a wider freedom. So her spirit ran quietly enough between its sheltering banks, though with an undercurrent of half-conscious silent desperation. Being only a girl child, however, what she did with her freedom at the neglected tea hour was to visit the corner drugstore with Bonnie Lou in order to enjoy a Coke. Perhaps this was a form of research into the life of her own kind of which she knew so little, but if so, its first discovery was one of anguish. On that afternoon Bonnie spoke of Blaise. No anguish certainly to Sophie to hear the somewhat highly colored description of "Hildreth's boy" as he seemed to be known to Little Sandy. "He's sort of exciting," said Bonnie between pulls at her straw, her long-lashed eyelids fanning like the wings of a golden butterfly. "Exotic. But, gosh, the boy's got a temper! He fights. You ought to see him fight. It's something."

"Fight? What about? Who with?"

"Drop of a hat—and especially with anyone that takes a crack at his 'Mamma.' "

"But naturally. I *like* that."

"She's bound to be cracked at, you know." Bonnie relinquished her straw to move her head from side to side in a would-be worldly way. "She's a Jamaican, and some folks think she has a touch of the tarbrush. Oh, she's a looker, and"—glancing about her with a funny imitation of her gossipy mother's cautious movement—"you know . . . she's *his* . . . mistress."

"He couldn't marry her."

"Hullo—who's been talking to *you?*"

"Blaise LeClerc," said Sophie. Bonnie gave her a long, abstracted look. "And I think," Sophie went on, returning it with the unguarded frankness of her own, "that a man should be ready to fight for his mother, no matter what she's been or done. She has T.B. and she refused to marry Mr. Hildreth."

"Mr. Hildreth! We call him Danny Boy. Oh, Sophie, I wish you could get to some of the Red Hill parties. They really are something. He has a crowd of guests up there . . . people come in cars . . . foreigners and what-all, and besides, he lets us kids in sometimes. Blaise is real smart. He can play the piano and dance . . . he dances to a fare-you-well. Learned it abroad, I reckon. Better than anything the gang can put on, though he says I'm good. Blaise treats us kids to a real shindig at the Big Sandy Club when he's in funds. He gets a handout from Danny now and then. Nothing regular, I reckon, and that makes him kind of sore . . . I bet. Anyway, when he's hard up we go to that little old shack Diggs lets us use in return for repairs. It's beyond the shortcut through the woods—*you* know. And it's a right-of-way, so that new guy can't take it away from us. And speaking of Mr. Duncan Elder, I've

got something purely odd to tell you about him. . . ."

Here she was interrupted by Wilkins, her most persistent boyfriend and a prominent member of her "gang." He now pulled her away from the booth for some "date" she had forgotten, and it was when Sophie was picking up her check that she began to listen to a conversation in the booth just behind her own. A word had snapped at her attention. It was a man speaking in the quick, dry, unmodulated speech of the North. "I've often wondered where he'd been hiding out," it said, and the woman, "I don't see how you can be sure." "I tell you, Milly, he was as close to me as that counter, absorbed in his newspaper. . . . It was when I went into the stationer's for your postcards yesterday. He hadn't changed much, actually. I took his course at the university, you know—Renaissance—especially Italian. He looked rather frail, older, and a bit seedy, but distinguished. . . . Never glanced in my direction, and probably wouldn't have recognized me if he had."

"What happened to the young man, an instructor, wasn't he?"

"Eric Elder?" Sophie's nerves jumped. Eric—that was the name! "I think I heard he's gone to Europe. They're more accustomed to that sort of . . . scandal there . . . more lenient, too, these days."

"Uh-huh," agreed the bored voice of Milly.

But her companion went on with considerable feeling. "I always thought, you know, that this poor guy brought disaster on his own head by sticking his neck out in Elder's defense. He practically forced the faculty to ease him out—after the young man and his 'friend' had been expelled. Here comes Harry—keep this under your hat. The man came to this godforsaken place to be forgotten, and I wouldn't for the world—" Harry, who had gone over to the counter, returned at this point, and all three moved toward the door, cool, bronzed,

smart, with a look of being invisible to anyone but one another, alone in a privileged and special world. Very few of that type passed through Little Sandy. Sophie began to breathe again when they got into a large touring car laden with baggage and turned with slow, silent movements ponderously northward and away. Milly's head was bent over a road map and Harry was at the wheel. The other man, he of the merciful heart, would be forever nameless.

There was no one in the drugstore but the clerk who had been busy taking care of Harry at the counter and was now reading a paperback and chewing gum . . . and Sophie's frozen self. For she was cold, weak and sick. She told herself that she had been wrong, that the name had not been Eric Elder, that there were thousands of professors of Renaissance history, that it had been a bad dream and that she must forget it, put it out of her memory forever . . . above all not try to understand it, never try to do that. Eric Elder . . . who had taken her in his arms and had looked to her childish eyes like Sir Galahad over the mantel . . . and Fa . . . that professor, "frail and a bit seedy" who had loved him . . . *like a son.*

Across the branched sky a pale moon seemed to run with her as she fled that night to her own hideout in the summerhouse above the brook. She cared nothing for the sin of trespass. She had but one desperate necessity—escape. Supper had been a torment. She could not look Fa in the face for fear he might read in her eyes some reflection of her experience. She had never loved him so much, nor felt so hot a desire to fight for him against an implacable world. She wished to be like Blaise, ready and able to use her fists. She understood vaguely the fashion of Fa's disgrace and knew with the incandescent certainty of love that it had been loyalty

to Harmon's brother, that self-regardless championship that had ruined his life and ended his career, the gentle, harmless, beautiful career of scholarship. Harmon Elder's quick gratitude would have proved for her Fa's innocence even if her own knowledge had not already done so. It was not shame for him that sent her flying under that pale moon, it was her anger and her helplessness.

Now she understood Fa's eager emphasis on Duncan Elder's being a stranger from a far land, one who would not be likely to know of his background or his history. It was not only the fact that Duncan was Harmon Elder's son that had made the new friendship such a welcome one.

She reached the arbor, threw herself down on its floor, laid her arm along the bench that followed the eight-sided latticed walls and bent down her head upon it. She prayed for Fa as a child prays, and felt her bare arm wet with tears. But God seemed to turn away from her disaster, so that when she looked up again she had never felt more helpless, more alone.

And from the loneliness of her childhood, a low cry escaped her. She heard it as though it had come from other lips. "Ree . . . Ree . . ."

There had been no sound of footsteps on the needled sandy earth, but someone stood there at the doorless opening of her refuge. "I heard you calling. . . . May I help?"

The resonant young voice was wild with a startled joy; the face, white under a finger of the moon, leaped at her—hazel eyes, rich mouth, an eager, bewildered face. She had gotten to her feet, not afraid but unbelieving. It was the boy in the portrait, save that he was older by several years. She drew in an almost laughing breath. "You're Ree. . . ." She did not quite know what she was saying.

"Am I?"

"Yes. And I'm Sophie."

He shook his head, laughing—or was he sobbing? "All right. Have it your own way. I'm Ree or anyone you please, but"—here he looked over his shoulder fearfully but came no closer—"you must help me, you know." His accent was not quite English, neither muddled nor overly precise, it came beautifully like something free. "I've got to be quick. I must tell you . . . if I can . . . somehow I'm here . . . I think I came to find you. . . ." With a sharp and fearful change of voice he held out to her a beggar's hand. "Help me . . . try . . . try. . . ." With that, turning from her, she ready to follow him, held back by her overwhelming sudden fear, he seemed to grope his way up the slope, stopped there above her, bent over—she could see him vaguely in the brightening moonlight, for a mist was lifting—one hand raised to grasp a tree trunk as though for support. Even as she tried to force her body to his aid he came erect, tall, straight. His hand dropped, he picked up something from the ground, stood for a moment as though thinking deeply, and walked with deliberate steps away from her up through the black and silver woods through Elderberry.

At long last, "I was asleep," she told herself, shivering. "It was a dream. I was unhappy, I remembered Ree. . . ." But she was remembering, too, with a feeling of intensified reality, how, standing in the hall of Elderberry that first afternoon of the heir's arrival, she had sensed an appeal for help, for rescue. There in the old house someone had groped his way toward her in spirit, and now in actual presence—someone so like Duncan Elder that a trick of moonlight or of excited imagination might have changed him to the memory of the imaginary playfellow.

But whatever its explanation, the mysterious event

had steadied her, as a frightened mother might be steadied by the scared grasp of a child's hand. The sense of helpless loneliness had left her. Self-confidence and courage had come back. As for her father, things might be worse. Nobody else had overheard the story, she had at least seen the body of her fear and could learn to live with it and perhaps to help Fa to bear or to forget his own. He had at last a friend. . . . Here, having reached the stile, she paused to look back up the misty allée that led to the summerhouse.

Had it been Duncan Elder himself who had hesitated in the doorway, hearing only a faint cry? He might not even have seen her in her dark dress crouching in shadow on the floor. It had been only for a moment he was there—the instant of a dream on the edge of sleep. . . . She knew how vivid was her imagination, how like reality her frequent dreams. If only . . . if only . . . her heart had not gone out so strongly to that cry for help, that beseeching voice.

She did not sleep that night until near morning. Next day she went about pale and dazed, tidying the little house. After the usual light lunch—Fa with a book in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, his eyes vaguely lifted to her at intervals—she made her necessary trip to Main Street. She was delayed by small errands and came in by the back door. As she set down a paper bag on the kitchen table she heard footsteps not of Fa's making across the floor of the living room. She opened the door, and Duncan Elder faced her in all his dignity. Her heart gave one great leap, then settled to a slow, sick tempo. As his penetrating eyes met hers the bright blood shamed her face. Of course—that had been a waking dream last night, brought on by the shock of her discovery about her father's disaster. She had been longing for sympathy, for love. That other figure standing in the moonlit doorway,

that vibrant unfamiliar voice, the unlikely fragments of his speech—had surely not been real. And the appeal for help? It echoed again in the ear of a memory she could not trust. "I came to find you . . . try . . . try. . . ."

Her visitor was saying, "I found your door open—I have been waiting for your father's return, Miss Graeme, or for yours. I am fortunate."

She heard herself replying almost as formally, "I am glad you came," and wondered half wildly whether she should ask him if he had glimpsed a dim figure in his summerhouse last night. "My father is so glad that you are in the old house." This was the real Sophie talking to the real Duncan Elder, and God be praised, she was awake! She need not fear this stranger, this tall, imposing man. "You should hear how he talks about the way you are arranging the books. He used to be up there all the time."

"I hope he will renew the habit. The library is his. And you? What can I offer to Miss Sophie as an inducement to frequent Elderberry?"

In anyone else, she thought, his bookishness would have been close to ludicrous, and in his elaborate courtesy there was so little warmth that involuntarily she searched his face for mockery. But the search brought only a renewed impression of his towering superiority, a self-assurance based not on anything trivial or pretentious, but on a strange absence—was it of fear? Now, that was a curious word for it, but still she felt that here was a human being who might never have known what it was to be afraid. There was a godlike calm and confidence in his face—not the face of a merciful god, perhaps, but of an untouchable being. Out of her reach. Out of the range of her sympathy, her comprehension; and his speech, which had at first seemed to put him in Fa's generation or even further back than

Fa's, now gave the impression of agelessness. She felt small of body, and childish of mind and soul. His power filled the little low-ceiled room.

While the unuttered stream of consciousness flowed swiftly on, she was making conversation like any other hostess with any other guest. "Please tell me about Africa," she was saying, and both sat down close as space made necessary, he in an armchair at the corner of the small sofa of her choice. "I can give you coffee or tea or sherry, but it's early. Shall we wait until Fa gets back? He went to the post office to pick up some books. He gets them from the Washington library for his research. He's writing a book on medieval Italian history, you know."

Duncan Elder bowed from the waist as though to acknowledge the importance of this fact. "And you," he said, "are you interested in Africa?"

"Of course. Who isn't? It's like one of those mythical countries coming up out of the sea . . . if you know what I mean." She became confused by her own vague reference but managed to go on, as he said nothing to help her. "You had a terrible experience, didn't you?—being so desperately ill and deserted and finding your way to the port. Mr. Crewe said it was a miracle you came through alive. How did you ever find your way through the jungle?" Suddenly aware that in her efforts to keep the conversation going she was giving him no chance to answer, she laughed, freed from embarrassment, and he sat listening to the sound as though it had been the voice of an impossible bird, prehistoric, mythical. "You were brought up in some sort of mission, Mr. Elder?"

"Will you call me by my first name? It is Duncan."

"I'd like to. And I'm—you know—Sophie."

"Sophie . . . Sophie. . . ." he repeated, in that low, level tone, and she was reminded of the portrait,

for he was looking at her with those colorless gray, strongly browed eyes.

"I wish you'd tell me," she said, "who the boy in that picture is, the one in your hall close to the dining-room door, opposite the mirror. He scared the life out of me. I must tell you that I've been a trespasser at Elderberry before the day you caught me at it, and that once—the time the boy startled me—I thought he was a real person. . . . I'd actually broken into your house. Now you won't want to offer me any inducement!"

Without responding to her question or to her confession he went back to a broken thread of inquiry. "I was brought up in my stepfather's research center. He was not a missionary in any religious sense. I daresay my mother wanted me to carry on his work, but my inclination was decidedly for exploration. I have been fortunate in retaining in my service a native who knew me in my childhood and delights in telling me about my habits and adventures."

Here, suddenly, on an impulse that had been gathering force in her commenting mind, she looked at him intently. "And you had no stepbrothers or sisters?" she asked with a certain abruptness.

His eyes narrowed as though he were inspecting a curious specimen through a strong magnifying lens. "I was an only child," he said. Which, thought Sophie, *doesn't answer my question, for of course he* was *an only child by his mother's first marriage.*

"It's too bad," she went on, "there wasn't any member of your family to come here with you. You must be very lonely in that big old house."

"Lone-ly? What would cause me to be lone-ly?"

She answered, daring a half smile, "Why . . . being alone."

"A strange notion," and she found herself suddenly

impatient of his incredulous superiority, of the face so like the portrait in feature, so unlike another eager and bewildered face moon-smitten or fashioned out of the shadows in her dream. This one was like a dark mask, impenetrably transparent, which she longed almost fiercely to shatter. It was no weak impulse, her fingers tightened, a tumult of angry longing prompted violence, startling her to an enforced composure. She must find that other face again, she must hear that voice, or she would be alone forever. . . .

He was talking on smoothly. "I became, Peter reminds me, at an early age interested in native life. I associated with the African children. Later I visited the tribal villages. I picked up a number of the native dialects and practiced many of their customs and observances. I went far afield."

"Your parents must have been scared to death about you."

"Hardly, I think. My mother imagined, no doubt, that I was under the aegis of the Christian god."

His remark startled, almost shocked her. It sounded as though he felt himself independent of this aegis, of the "Christian god." In fact, it seemed to her that he spoke of a tribal rather than a universal deity.

When she heard Fa's footsteps on the porch she was relieved. She hurried to meet him at the front door. "Mr. Elder is here, Fa. I'm going to get you both tea."

After she had served the tea and seen them comfortably absorbed in a discussion of some recent Oriental excavation, she left them and went back to her kitchen. There she discovered that Bonnie was waiting for her on the back porch, perched on the rail kicking her heels and whistling softly to herself. As soon as she saw Sophie she jumped down and Sophie went to join her on the top step. "I heard yawl talking in there,"

she said. "I got to tell you what I started yesterday about that neighbor of yours."

"Sh! He's with Fa now."

Bonnie laid a hand across her richly painted mouth and waved her eyelashes. Then she moved closer to Sophie and murmured her story. It was impossible to check Bonnie's confidences. Once she began, however, Sophie couldn't help listening. Bonnie's stories often startled her ears as she realized they were meant to, one of Bonnie's favorite games being this one of shocking what she believed to be Sophie's innocence.

"I was with Bulkie—*you* know."

"Of course. He's Wilkins, isn't he?"

"Yes'm. Well, we went out totin' each of us one of these here little old tin buckets like kids use at the beach, to pick us some berries on that slope just beyond the brook—"

"You mean the Elderberry brook?"

"Yes'm. And it was hot enough to burn the skin off your nose. So we went on up into the woods to cool off, and it was real nice there under the pines. My mistake was in taking Bulkie along. You know Bulkie!" Sophie didn't, but understood vaguely what was meant. "Well, we sat down to eat some of the berries and then I lay down to rest. It was right now that Bulkie begins to bother me worse'n the no-see-ums or the jigger fleas. I don't know just what gets into that guy. I never can teach him to behave. Well, honey, I don't need to go into details, I reckon, but while I was tryin' real hard to keep him where he belongs, I just happened to look up, and there—about maybe three or four yards away amongst the trees—stands Mr. Duncan Elder—yes'm—as cool as you please, just gazin' at us." She stopped to grip Sophie's knee and to shake it for emphasis. "And I sure enough do think he was just that minute taking down the field glasses from his face. He might have

been at the zoo, Sophie. Lord knows how long he'd been standing still as a tree, watching us. One thing certain, when he saw I'd caught him out he just calmly picked up a sort of parcel he was totin' along and turned just as slow and moved away sort of thoughtful, like he was makin' mental notes on what he'd seen. He acted right unhuman . . . or more like *he* was human, one of these geologists or zoologists or whatever, and Bulkie and I were just specimens . . . some kind of *critters*. I coulda killed him! But Bulkie hadn't eyes for anything in the world but little me, so of course he didn't know what had been going on up yonder and I sure wasn't going to tell him, but being so touchy and mad and flustered gave me a sort of extra authority, I reckon you'd call it, and I got him straightened up and went on out of there as quick as I could make it—he right sulky the way he always gets to be. But was I in a hurry to leave that corner of the woods!" Here she turned a big-eyed, fairly frightened face upon her listener. "What kind of man is that, I want you should tell me? I wouldn't of thought so much of it actually if he'd looked shocked or startled or whatever; that would have been right natural, I reckon. He's an older man and a foreigner 'n all, and not used to the way us modern kids go on. But I wish I could get you to see what he was like. It scared me . . . honestly." And she bent her fluffy head to her bare knees, and Sophie felt the shudder that ran over her.

Bonnie looked up quickly at the sound of Dr. Graeme's step, got to her feet, and stood for a hesitant minute below the porch. Her eyes were wide and anxious, but before moving away she looked back over a shrugging shoulder and murmured, "He's right handsome, isn't he?" And as Graeme's foot struck the kitchen floor, she hurried out of sight.

Sophie took Bonnie's would-be shockers with a grain of salt, that final speech renewing her somewhat shaken skepticism, and she was not slow to reconstruct the scene above the berry patch. Duncan Elder had been watching a bird or some small animal over the prone bodies of the trespassers and had seen them only when he lowered his glasses. Naturally, as Sophie thought any gentleman would, he had moved quickly away with an assumed air of making mental notes on his specimen. He had wanted them to believe that he had not seen their antics. Had it not been for that one look in Bonnie's small, expressive face when it turned the big scared eyes upon her, and that trembling of her body, Sophie would not have given the incident one more serious thought. But that look and that tremor did haunt her, and kept returning to her memory after she had repeatedly dismissed them. Angry and ashamed Bonnie might well have been, but not pale-lipped, anxious-eyed, and shaken by a half-incredulous fear, as though she had seen an unrecognizable creature in the Elderberry woods.

Chapter 5

Sophie and her father had been in the habit for many years of observing the anniversary of Harmon Elder's death, placing flowers upon his grave. But on the date of this anniversary Graeme was not feeling well, and asked Sophie to perform the ritual alone. So she set out, a laden basket on her arm, up the long, steep hill to the cemetery. She found her way to the familiar plot, its grassy mounds kept trim, its headstones clean, by a legacy of Harmon's. Sophie knelt on the turf to scatter her flowers across his grave.

A shadow fell upon it. She looked up. Duncan Elder stood above her. He held a trowel in one hand; his field glasses were slung across his shoulder. He was looking calmly down at her.

"Did you come here," she asked, steadying her voice and trying to calm her startled pulses, "because it is the anniversary of your father's death? Fa and I always

have done this together—but this year I had to do it alone."

He was rubbing some earth from the blade of his trowel and spoke in a preoccupied voice, looking about him. He paid no attention to her question.

"So this is your garden of death," he said.

She opened her lips to protest the grim title, but he was speaking again. "You are wrong to personify death," he said in the measured tones of utter conviction. "You do not seem to understand the phenomenon. You have personified it in some primitive fashion. In your notices you write, for example: 'Death takes Conrad Graeme' . . ." Sophie gasped and put her hands to her face, but he went on as though he had not heard or seen her reaction, ". . . as though it were a being, a creature, an active agent. Death does not exist at all. It is one of your myths. You even picture him as a skeleton with a grinning skull and a scythe in his bony hand. 'The Grim Reaper' . . . or, as your optimistic poet describes him, 'serenely arriving, arriving. . . .' He is not an arriver. He is a vacuum. Life, you must understand, is a force, creative and consuming. It takes hold of material, chemical, psychic, physical entities, as any user of tools will do, adapting them to its purposes, and when the tool, tree, or weed, or the body of an animal—man or beast—becomes obsolete, damaged, or worn out—ineffectual—life either quietly loosens it hold, lets it fall, or violently consumes it. One of your thinkers has defined life as 'the sum total of those forces that resist death.' Anyone able to dismiss death would know better. Life does not resist death, it causes it. Life is creation. It is the great artisan, changing its tools forever but never pausing in its work. Believe me, Sophie, there is no such creature as death."

"But there are men and women who have *given*

their lives for love of something or someone, the men who die to save their fellows, their homes, their countries, the men who submit themselves to—to desperate medical experiments, the martyrs for a faith. They have . . . what they say . . . 'triumphed' over death, not conquering it by successful resistance or dismissing it, but . . . I suppose you'd say . . . allowing it to conquer them. They had their own way with death."

"They identified themselves with that other life, the one to which your Christ bore witness, not like those of you who make yourselves the children of death. Those others you describe chose the life that one must lose one's life to find—the life to which He is the way. . . ."

"Duncan, why do you call Him . . . ours? Isn't He your Christ?"

Duncan answered slowly. "No, He is not our Christ. We killed Him."

She felt bewildered. "No. *We . . . we* killed Him!"

"You tried to. You are still trying. But for you He is still alive. Without Him we have found our life and we choose to keep it. While you—you have lost one without finding the other."

"Duncan . . . 'we'? What does that mean? Who are 'you'? Oh, please, who are 'you'?" She put her hands up to frame large, startled eyes.

His gray gaze swept down to her with a gull-like swerve. "I am not trying to set you conundrums. Let me speak in some fashion that you can understand. Let us say that I am a member of some—community, a fraternity, a sect, a dedicated group."

"Who don't believe in death or in—salvation. A monk? Yes," Sophie cried, "I get it now. That's what you are, some sort of monk. But not a Christian monk!"

"Not a Christian monk."

"Some ancient African or Asian religion with, maybe—occult powers and—a contempt for women."

"What makes you think that, Sophie? I have no contempt. I am merely impervious to lust."

"And do women mean only *that to* you?"

"They mean, as women, nothing to me—nothing different, nothing special. Nor I to them."

"You are not allowed to . . . to love at all?"

"We—do—not—love," he said. After a silence, "We *live,*" he went on, "therefore we do not love. We have made our choice to everlasting life."

Sophie met his eyes with a long, wondering look, then turned slowly and let her own sweep over the graves, the white and gray and garnet monuments, tall, short, the many mounds and slabs, crosses and angels, the tiny graves of infancy. "These," she thought, "are not just worn-out tools."

As though he had heard her thought, "Would you," he demanded, "set up your cross above a rusted axe or a broken oar?"

"If you had loved God's tool, the tool of his love," she murmured, speaking carefully as though each word had grave importance, "'if you loved it very much, every inch of it, every stain on it, if it had . . . if you had used it for years . . . and it had been a dear part . . . the dearest part . . . of your life . . ."

"Loved it?" He stared. "Loved a disintegrating body and a set of bones?"

"For what they were . . . if you had loved it like that . . . like I said . . . I think you'd like to lie down there beside it. . . ."

"So many kinds of love," he said, "so many kinds, and each one a door to pain. Come and help me look for a little plant."

"A little plant?"

He held down his hand to her, but when she touched

it, drew back his own so that she got to her feet unaided. There had been a change in that regular, colorless face. It was like a dim underwater struggle that groped and vanished. It passed so rapidly that she could not be sure it had been there at all.

She followed him down one of the graveled paths which vanished into a neglected corner of the cemetery where they came upon a wilderness of weeds and bushes, grass and wild flowers. Below there was a smothered seepage of water, rimmed by growths intensely green, and here Duncan took out a magnifying glass and began to peer and to search, parting the tiny jungle things with his long hands.

"What plant is it?" she asked presently, thinking. *I was right. He has a feeling against me. He didn't want to touch my hand.*

"It has a lot of names," he was saying. "It is very ancient. There is a mention of it in your Old Testament. It is my research project to locate it. It has been dying out mysteriously in a certain area where its preservation is of mortal importance. I had surmised it would be found in some tropical jungle crowded with living growths, but to my amazement I think that it may be here—a very feeble growth certainly—in a place dedicated to your grim reaper."

"Not to him, Duncan, but to everlasting love and everlasting life."

He stood up suddenly, a tiny uprooted seedling in his hand, and faced her like a judge. "It must be to only one of them, Sophie Graeme," he announced sternly, "never to everlasting human love and to everlasting human life. Never the two together. Never that."

He was formidable. When he turned she went with him back to his car. They did not speak at all on their way to where it stood. His silence was meditative, hers

chill. There had been for her a bewildered shock at his statement, which was incomprehensible to her and yet had the quality of a revelation.

He drove her home in the same silence and went in to see her father, who welcomed him with eagerness.

It was not long after her visit with Sophie on the kitchen porch that Bonnie, coming toward St. Anthony's Rectory, met with the user of field glasses in the Elderberry woods. She suffered a moment of acute embarrassment, but Mr. Elder's complete unself-consciousness, the formal courtesy of his bow, reassured her, so that she was immediately convinced that he had not really seen her, or that, if so, he had not recognized either Bulkie or herself.

"You're Mr. Elder, aren't you?" she asked in her childish, almost lisping soprano. "I've been just crazy to meet you. You just can't imagine how excited we-all are about you. You're a thrill, honestly."

He bowed over her extended hand. "And you are?"

"I'm Bonnie Lou Hicks. My father runs the pharmacy on Main. You've talked to him. He told me."

"Yes. If you are planning to visit the Reverend Mr. Benson or his wife, I must inform you that neither of them is at home."

Bonnie was not surprised by his knowledge of the rector's doings. She knew that he occupied a pew in St. Anthony's Church, had taken out a membership in the circulating library, had opened a substantial account in the bank, paid cash to smaller merchants and opened charge accounts with the larger ones, paid his bills promptly, and was expected to join the Kiwanis Club. Mr. and Mrs. Hicks heartily approved of Duncan Elder, and Bonnie was well aware of her mother's special interest. His tall, erect figure, his cold, analytical gaze, unsmiling face, and formal manner

had deeply impressed the ambitious mother. He was, she told Bonnie, a right good example of a real foreign aristocrat but "better'n that, a rich American southerner."

"I was going to meet Sophie after choir practice, but I reckon she must have gone home. I'm sort of late. I'll go to the Cottage—you're walking that way, aren't you? May I go along?"

He bowed again and she went beside him with her quick little steps, talking in her childish voice until, when they reached the Graemes' gate, he stopped, opening it for her.

"You're not coming in, Mr. Elder?"

"No. Dr. Graeme will be up at Elderberry."

"Then I'll say good-bye, and I do hope you'll come to see me sometime soon." He met the curious long-lashed stare she lifted, neither coquettish nor obviously inviting, but the vacuum abhorred by nature and by the average male. It was an effective stare, as she well knew. But he met it with none of the usual reactions either of confusion or excitement; merely in his eyes a lens seemed to fix itself upon her vacancy. When her gaze fell there was an unusual flush in her pale face and her heart was fluttering. She felt a little scared and turned quickly away.

Her attention, however, was almost immediately distracted by the sight of a horseman with another animal in the lead who had turned into the lane leading past the Graemes' kitchen garden. Bonnie recognized the rider, Blaise exercising Hildreth's horses, so she ran along the road to the lane entrance, meaning to call a summons. To her surprise he was no longer visible. Then she saw a movement among the trees. The horses had been tied up there above the high bank and were stamping angrily. Blaise she could now see standing inside the garden hedge talking to Sophie. Bonnie went

a few steps nearer; she could hear the sound of a short breathless laugh. Then they moved out of her sight beyond the corner of the house.

Bonnie was curious and amazed. She knew that Sophie had some acquaintance with Blaise, but there was something in the two moving figures that suggested a longer intimacy. The way his head bent, the way they walked—it filled her with excitement and dismay. For Blaise, she fancied, was one of her own possibilities, and by far the most intriguing of her boyfriends, older than the rest. He treated her with an amused, offhand affection, and his eyes seemed to promise a certain complicity with her so-obvious desires. Bonnie was neither sensitive nor critical. He was a good-looking kid in his queer way, and he had what it takes. But—Blaise and Sophie! Bonnie's genuine affection and respect for Sophie was immediately disturbed. She went back from the lane and lingered near the Graeme gate, trying to make up her mind whether to interrupt that meeting or to go on her way. She knew that Dr. Graeme would not approve of any friendship between "Hildreth's boy" and that well-guarded daughter. Would he know of this rendezvous inside the garden hedge during his absence? How much did Sophie herself know about this boy?

Bonnie presently moved away and walked slowly homeward, her small head under its habitual scarf bent forward, and her hands pocketed. Apart from jealousy, this new vision of Sophie shocked and puzzled her. It was out of character. This was not Sophie of the Elderberry woods.

Sophie and Blaise were not aware of looking like lovers, nor did they think of this meeting in Dr. Graeme's kitchen garden as a clandestine rendezvous. Sophie's small breathless laugh had been in answer to

Blaise's first speech as he came toward her and she turned from her clothesline in surprise.

"Come over and meet Luke," he said.

She gave that small breathless laugh, and her eyes, wonderful with guilty excitement, crossed the hedge. "Your overalls are O.K.," said her riding master, "and your shoes will do. Come on." Red-cheeked, tight-lipped, she allowed Blaise to adjust her stirrups, and took the reins in her hands according to instructions. He led her up and down a few times, ran with her for some distance as she jockeyed above Luke's easy trot, and then let go. "Oooo . . . Blaise!" And she was away.

She did not pull at the reins or cry out "Whoa." She tried to manage the animal lightly and to rise to his trot. She dared not look back at Blaise, who stood grinning with a half-mischievous, half-paternal air until she vanished around the turn, when he began to follow with a sudden feeling of uneasiness. She sat so straight, she looked so small, her hair shone like brush fire in the sun and shadowed to russet in the shade . . . she was so beautiful.

Alone between the dense ranks of the pines on the narrowing trail, Sophie was in ecstasy. Luke had broken into a lope like the motion in a dream, and she found herself at ease in the English saddle, her feet firm and light in the stirrups, her hands low on Luke's neck. She rode as a child rides—by balance, instinctively. Her face in the sun and shadow was more brilliant than her hair. She had never so gallantly entered the Elderberry woods. More martial than a conqueror she felt, her head higher than the shrubs, the blue above her with its wind lifting her out of that dim world of sorrow, repression, and escape. She had gone so often into the shadows like a small earth-animal; now she rode the very crest of youth's wave, and the strength of the horse was hers, his pride, his forward-going.

As they went farther up the sloping trail Luke began to sidle skittishly. Startled, she saw the figure of a man standing not far above her among the trees. He was looking at her, and when she made a low, uncertain sound, not summons, not a name, he began to walk toward her, his eyes fastened on her face.

She could see him clearly as he came, a young man, tall, slender, supple, older by several years than the boy of the portrait, who would have been, she thought, in his late teens. As he came toward her with straight, light steps she caught the desperate courage of his face, like that of a man moving defiantly toward an incomprehensible challenge; his hands clenched but swinging at his sides, his head thrown back, his eyes blazing to hers as though her face held out the hope of victory.

So he came and, coming, his beautiful courage broke suddenly into a smile, reckless, enchanting, more endearing than a lover's speech. Then Luke shied and threw his rider to the ground.

She fell as she had ridden, as a child falls, and on the sandy trail she felt no hurt at all. But there was a stunned instant before she got to her feet. She was shaking and her face was white. She looked up as soon as her eyes had cleared to see a stiff figure standing among the trees above the trail, as still as they and staring down at her.

"Duncan!" Her voice faltered toward him who now, without a sound or smile or gesture, turned away and walked steadily and smoothly up into the thickness of the trees.

Blaise came at a run, grabbing at her, feeling her over. "You're not . . . hurt?"

She laughed, not steadily. "Not a bit . . . just . . . all mixed up."

He caught up Luke's fallen reins, for the horse had

moved only a few paces from his fallen rider and seemed surprised to find her grounded. Blaise did not look at Sophie now, he was staring up into the wood tapestry.

"Who was that, for Chrissake?"

"Duncan."

"Duncan?"

"Elder."

Blaise's narrow face was darkly white. "The hell it was! He saw you fall off?"

"He must have. He made Luke jump. If I'd seen him first . . . I might have stayed on." She found it impossible to speak of that other apparition.

Sophie thought Blaise would run up the bank after that disappearing figure, but instead he fell to brushing the sand off her, and when she protested that it didn't matter, he walked back with her slowly along the trail, leading Luke and saying nothing. He looked as though the muscles of his face were too tight for speech. She felt the rage in him like waves of invisible radiation.

She murmured, "Perhaps he didn't see me. I'm not sure, but sometimes I've thought that his eyesight's not quite normal. Or perhaps"—she laughed nervously —"mine isn't."

Blaise shot her one hot look. "Not only his eyes! Duncan? You call him that?" This between his teeth, addressing the ground.

"Why shouldn't I? I see a lot of him. He comes down to the house with Fa and sometimes stays for supper. Blaise, oughtn't I to get up again? I mean, they always say that when you get thrown you ought to ride again at once."

"You're not scared?"

"Of Luke? Not a bit."

"You don't scare easy, do you? Or your 'Fa' for you."

"I don't know what you mean." She stood still to stare at him.

"*That.*" Blaise gestured toward the empty woods behind them.

"Duncan?"

"Yeah—Duncan—who doesn't see out of normal eyes or act out of a normal brain."

"Blaise!" She was beginning to be angry. His fury had a certain contagious quality, and her already shaken self-possession was wearing thin. "He couldn't be a safer man to be with," she affirmed, speaking as much against her own doubt as against his contempt.

Blaise drawled, "I'm not so damn sure."

Then Sophie laughed the short laugh of rage. "Fa would say he was much safer company for me than you are, Blaise."

His face glittered at her, a thunder-and-lightning face. He swung away, was up on Luke, his feet clear of the shortened stirrups, and off, sweeping through the convict stripes of sun and shadow out of her sight.

She stepped back to the side of the lane, sat down, and beat the mossy ground beside her with her fists. Then she sat with the tears pouring down her face. After a few minutes she stopped crying and began to struggle for composure. She was still shaken by a chill astonishment over the abrupt and total disappearance of the boy who had been coming toward her and who had seemed indeed no apparition; by rage—with Elder who had ignored her calling of his name and walked indifferently away, with Blaise, and more than a little with her confused and humiliated self. She began, however, in all fairness to her father's friend and her neighbor, to find excuses for Duncan Elder. No doubt he had seen her fall and her quick recovery, realized she was unhurt, and knew that she would not welcome a witness to her disaster. He must, moreover, have

frightened off the younger man, close at that moment to a dense copse and able to spring rapidly out of sight. Or perhaps he had been dismissed by some abrupt gesture of mastery. For Elder was the master, that she somehow knew. As for Blaise, his anger was fantastic, but remembering that pale wrenched face, she felt a depression that settled upon her heart like a fog.

Through it she watched a squirrel drop down from a branch and leap lightly with his odd pauses and rhythmic tail undulations across her path. He ran up a tree opposite her and from its security sharply upbraided her. *You too!* thought Sophie, and that bit of self-diversion brought her to her feet and she started down the trail for home. This morning had begun so almost happily, and now . . . ! But that was life.

Blaise with Luke and Lucy, drowsily switching flies and content to stand with their reins across the fence, stood waiting for her near her gate. The thunder-and-lightning face had clouded to gray weather. He looked grim. As she came up he took a few sharp steps to meet her and spoke abruptly. "You're so right, Sophie," he said, and looked at her with uncharacteristic steadiness, "and your father is right too."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry I said that." But he went on with no apparent recognition of the apology, ". . . not right, mind you, in feeling you're safe with Elder, but right as rain about your not being safe with me."

She tried to speak, but his quick voice prevented her. "You're too good for Little Sandy and you're way too good for me. Let's face it. I'm not for you. I know it damn well, too damn well."

Her voice, her eyes, her hand upon his arm, all synchronized to a strong and true emotion. "You are someone I need," she said. "I've no friend like you. I've got so I do need you." Her eyes filled. "Blaise

darling." And with that the dead dark color of his face lightened and his arms came strongly around her. Her body closed to his. She did not move. She stood quite still, her head drawn back so that she could look into the nearness of his eyes, and spoke in the same quiet voice. "No matter what anyone in the world says or thinks, I do feel safe with you." The tears came down and stood upon her cheeks.

His arms left her as though some strong invisible being had plucked them away, and he stood back. He had bitten his lips so that a drop of blood showed. Sophie and he moved apart, eyes still locked. Blaise said with his usual staccato violence, "Make use of me, Sophie, I'm all yours"—and smiling suddenly with that tossed-coin brilliance—"I never said that to any girl before. I'll see you. . . ." He was up on Lucy, caught at Luke's rein, and was gone.

Sophie, turning, was aware of Duncan Elder's slow approach along the lane. Desperately afraid that he might speak to Fa about her accident, she went quickly to meet him. The feel of Blaise's arms was around her body; the banked fire of his eyes, the groping warmth of his mouth so near hers, still quivered through her inexperienced nerves, but her concern for Fa overcame this tumult and she spoke to Duncan before he reached her gate.

"Why didn't you come to help me?" she asked him, speaking lightly in the face of his grave deference.

"I do not understand." He stood with his hand on the gate, his high face bent a trifle to study her.

"You scared my horse so that he threw me off."

"Where was that?"

"Oh, Duncan"—she gestured—"half a mile up there in the lane where it runs into a woods trail. I saw you after my fall and called to you."

"You are mistaken, Sophie. It was someone else."

"There was someone else, but . . . he went away before Luke threw me. You must have seen him too."

"I saw no one, Sophie. It was this—someone else. I did not see you fall or hear you speak to me."

She stared. "You were as close to me as the house is to us now, Duncan—up the slope a way. You must have seen me—and him too—when I was on the horse and when I fell."

He bowed as though courtesy forbade a flat contradiction and said, "Is your father at home?"

"Please—I don't mind. I mean, I'm not ashamed of being thrown—it was my first ride—but I'd rather you wouldn't speak of it to Fa." The color painted her face the color of shame, but it was for her necessity, not for its appearance. "He would be frightened . . . shocked . . . and the doctor says to avoid that above everything."

Duncan bowed again assentingly. His bows were very expressive. "Shall we go in?" he asked, and opened the gate for her.

Chapter 6

The birds were singing in the garden and all around the house, but there were no birds singing in the woods when Sophie stepped down from the stile. It always surprised her how few birds were in the woods. She kept thinking about this as she went along the path, because she didn't want to think about the interview she had planned to have with Duncan Elder. It was not only that she was troubled by the strangeness of her experience with "Ree" and not only that she was rather timid with the master of Elderberry, but stronger than either of these was her fear for Ree himself. He was so evidently fighting a desperate terror of his own.

She had a feeling that if Duncan knew about her meetings with the strange youth, it might in some way increase whatever might be the cause of his fear. But it had become necessary to question someone, and her

story was so strange, so incredible, that she could think of no other possible confidant. If anyone at all knew about the youth and his plight it would be the owner of the Elderberry woods, so haunted.

She dared not ask her father even about the identity of the portrait in the hall, lest it might be a likeness of Harmon's brother who had "gone to live in Europe." She had of course thought of an explanation of sorts: an Elder boy mentally ill, related to Duncan, and brought by him and his servant to Little Sandy, kept there under restraint but able to manage or to be permitted an occasional freedom under the control of some mild sedative or some not-too-attentive warden. But she could not quite accept her own story. Surely Duncan would not find it necessary to keep such an invalid a secret prisoner, and besides, for all his bewildered plight the boy did not seem to her mentally astray. His face was brilliantly sane, intelligent. He seemed a tethered captive who was mysteriously jerked back from flight by some invisible control—a time limit? a signal? not audible or visible to her?—or by the approach of some dreaded guardian.

It was no easy interview that faced her, perhaps not even a very safe one. More than once she paused and hesitated, looking back at the now-invisible entrance to her path. But always she went on. She could not live in this suspense. She could no longer endure the incomprehensible and too-deeply-moving apparition. For his sake, even more than for her own, she must investigate. He had asked her to "try . . . try."

Fa was peacefully at work in his bedroom-study, Hattie was cleaning house and washing linen, Duncan she knew to be at home for he had been talking with Fa over the telephone in answer to some bookish inquiry. She might never have a better opportunity, and —there stood the house before her above its terrace

walls and there, looking down at her, the master of the house himself!

"I saw you coming, Sophie," he said as she climbed with some difficulty and no offer of a helping hand through the gap in the brick wall. "You are looking for me? Your father sent you for a book? I have it here. I was about to take it to him."

She was now standing before him amongst the roses, in the tremulous shade of blossoming shrubs. She found she could not speak.

"You are disturbed? Your father is ill?"

She drew a resolute breath and found her voice. "No. I am worried about something else . . . puzzled, that is, and I came hoping you would clear up the mystery." She lifted her eyes with an effort to his face. "It is something rather . . . strange."

"Do you wish to go indoors, or shall we sit here on the wall? There is no privacy like the privacy of open space." And he seated himself beside her, bending forward over those long and beautiful hands. "Has it perhaps to do with the man you saw looking at you when you were thrown?"

"Not exactly with that man," she said, meeting his level, detached gaze, "but with another man, really a boy, only a little older than I am, I should think. He'd been running down through the woods above the trail and simply . . . vanished when you appeared and scared my horse."

"So you still believe that I was there watching you?"

"Yes, Duncan. I can't be mistaken about that."

"Curious," he said, "and curious about the boy. Not anyone you know?"

"He was," said Sophie, and had to clear her throat and stop an instant, "he was almost exactly like you, but even more like that portrait in the hall, the one I asked you about once, if you remember."

"I remember." There was a pause, then, "And he seemed to be . . . ?"

"Afraid . . . confused. He—"

He interrupted her. "What is the basis of your strong preoccupation with that portrait, may I ask?"

"Didn't I tell you once about my imaginary playmate and my notion that he would have looked like the boy in the portrait?"

He said nothing, but rose and began to walk to and fro before her, his hands linked behind his back. He stopped in front of her. "When, as a child, you summoned this playmate—how real did he seem to you?"

"Why . . . I didn't see him exactly, but I talked to him and seemed to make up his replies silently so that I thought . . . almost . . . that he was really answering me. It's hard to describe."

"Exactly. Sophie, you are an imaginative child, intensely suggestible, emotional, repressed, and lately you have been greatly moved by a new and strong disturbance in your life."

She drew back a little, dangerously near the edge of the high wall here above the forest, resting her hands against the bricks. "What do you mean?"

"I am referring to your friendship—if that is what you call it—for the young LeClerc."

She felt the blood springing into her face and anger increasing the speed of her pulse. "Duncan . . ." He had the air of a calm, detached, impartial counselor, laying bare the tangle of a troubled mind. As she looked into that passionless face he seemed to her a being of some superior wisdom, older by far than his years, incapable of the confusion to which he lent his exquisitely adjusted attention. As though before a stern professor she controlled her indignation. "I can't imagine, Duncan, what you mean, or what it has to do with my—mystery."

"Everything to do with it, as I shall show you. In the world you live in, were born into, Sophie, you and everyone around you are ruled by emotion. And to some of these emotions you react in a fashion that, I should think, must be bewildering in the extreme. You snatch at any means, no matter how preposterous, to escape from your unbearable realities." This *was* an analyst. She drew herself up, wishing that she could push him further from her. He seemed to loom enormously against the blue intensity of sky. "I have seen you sometimes going out with young LeClerc in his car, and I have seen you thinking of him with a certain shadow on your face. Your face is legible, unusually so, even for—" He changed his words. "Your father, as I know, has a strong dislike and disapproval of him, and your progressive intimacy has not yet come under his notice. Therefore, I imagine, being brought up with a conviction of guilt and sin, you have been made unhappy and remorseful. It is not natural to you to be secretive. You are more than usually frank and transparent, in spite of your dreamy detachment from reality."

She broke in. "Duncan, I don't want to hear about myself. I can't imagine why . . . what possible connection—"

"I am about to tell you. When you were a child you were lonely and no doubt in secret resented the loneliness—and that resentment created in your mind a sense of guilt. It created also *Ree,* who was a private possession, something you kept secret from your 'Fa.' You see now—or are you beginning to see—the connection?"

"No."

"You have reverted to your childhood here in the Elderberry woods and you have recreated Ree."

Sophie stood up, suddenly conscious that in her

slight withdrawal from the speaker she had narrowly escaped a fall, "What utter nonsense!" she cried. "Duncan, you are fantastic."

He ignored her and went smoothly on. "It is not only the guilt of your deception of your father that you have been feeling, but your own half-conscious reaction to the sensuality of LeClerc. I saw, when I was coming toward your gate, that he held you in his arms."

"I am going home."

"If you please, allow me to assist you in your difficulty. I will omit any further reference to your half-conscious dread *of*—and your subconscious desire *for*—this assault. . . ."

Sophie put her hands to her ears but let them fall when she saw that he stopped talking at once and stood directly in her path, so close that she would have had to push him aside. "You must forgive me," he began again. "I have been brought up in another civilization, another atmosphere. I am offending you. I regret this. But I would like to help you if you will still permit me. I am never confused, bewildered, or afraid, and surely my detachment and experience, which has been long . . . long . . . long . . . should be a help to you. It is offered with no possible will to insult or to offend you. I am incapable either of offering or of understanding offense. Believe me. Listen to me. It will help."

She waited, silenced, but tense from head to foot.

"To be brief, you have created for your comfort an innocent association with a youth of whom your father would not disapprove, in my likeness—for he would like you to marry me"—she gasped and flushed—"and in the likeness of your imaginary playmate. He has come to you, I presume, in moments of sudden fright, of half sleep, or under the stress of strong emotion.

His apparent fear is a reflection of your own. He is an hallucination, Sophie, believe me."

"You are wrong. I'll go back now. I can't . . . I can't I can't listen. . . ." And she went past him, forcing him to move aside, and ran to jump down through the rough gap. She cried out in pain as her foot turned under her and she crouched above it. Duncan bent his tall composure over the crumpled, quivering heap.

"I think I've sprained my ankle. It hurts horribly."

He straightened, put two fingers between his teeth, producing a sustained whistle that pierced the stillness and brought out a tall figure. Peter, in obedience to Duncan's gesture and with no apparent need for explanation, picked up Sophie with almost frightening ease, stepped through the gap, and moving rhythmically, carried her into the house down the hall to the room she had seen once before with Blaise.

It was beyond the dining room, opposite the formal living room beyond the paneled library, a square room with a wide couch pillowed and spread for sleep, an immense desk with its own swivel chair, two large armchairs, a terrestrial and celestial globe, maps and charts, a small open fireplace, and little else. Venetian blinds made bars of sunlight across the deeply carpeted floor. A long shelf or window seat followed the sills and held a number of small potted seedlings, some covered with muslin to keep them from the light. Sophie only dimly observed the surroundings as Peter laid her down on the couch and stood aside while his employer examined the unstockinged slim brown leg. The ankle was swollen and empurpled. Sophie was trying not to moan or cry, her hands clenched themselves in the bedding and she screwed her eyes tight shut at intervals under the frowning forehead. The hair about her face was damp and clinging, her lips

were tight. Pain of mind had merged with pain of body to an intensity of suffering.

Elder came close and she opened her eyes. She saw that Peter stood beside him looking fixedly down at her, and when Duncan waved his hand backward to dismiss him he paid no heed but kept his ground with a stubborn air, as though refusing to leave her here. It was only when Duncan turned up him with an emphatic motion that he slowly moved out of the door, closing it after him. She felt that he might be stationing himself outside like a sentinel.

"The pain you feel," said Elder, sitting down beside the couch on the carpeted floor, "is not in your ankle. It is in your mind, a message delivered to it by a nerve, a sort of S.O.S. Therefore it is your mind, or your brain, to be exact, which must be released, detached, become incommunicado. You must listen to me, Sophie. You must admit into your consciousness nothing except my voice and what it says to you." And without touching her, he began to sway slightly to and fro from his hips and to mutter a strange chant, a droning murmur that seemed presently to come not from him at all but sometimes from very far away, sometimes from a throbbing, nearness, absorbing, insistent, not to be ignored. And it had a rhythm almost musical, as of distant strings and drums. The pain at first kept time to it, matching its agonizing beat to this, but gradually it dropped away and the strange humming music took possession of her body. It seemed to be shaping a wordless communication, interpreting itself mysteriously to her conquered mind.

At long last she heard herself crying faintly, "Ree . . . Ree . . . Ree . . ." as though to save him from a threat, and with that repetition of his name the droning music began to fade, the drums beat more and more faintly, the vibrant strings were gradually mute.

It seemed to her that her tongue was wet and that she swallowed something.

She opened her eyes. She lay on her narrow bed at the Cottage. Dr. Sempel with his familiar round face and bald head bent over her. He had just finished strapping her ankle, which ached dully.

"So you're back home, eh, Sophie?" He moved along the bed to touch her forehead and to put his hand on her wrist. "Hum—back to normal. The Elderberry gentleman brought you back in his car, and that Ethiopian princeling bore you to your bed. What sort of dope did Elder give you, child?"

She put a weak hand to her head. "I don't know. I fell from the terrace . . . I went up there"—she could not remember—"with some message or—to get something. . . . I think he gave me something in a glass of water . . . I don't know what. . . ." There was a bitter medicinal taste upon her tongue.

The book her father had asked for had been brought with her in Elder's car and she believed that to get it had been her errand to Elderberry. Nor could she remember any part of the conversation on the terrace nor indeed anything about her meetings with the desperate young prisoner. But she was only too conscious of a deep depression and of a vague and heavy sense of loss.

Chapter 7

Sophie made light of her injury, and with her ankle strapped, was able to hobble about the house and soon to make her usual trip to market. As she came out from the store the paper bag was lifted from her arm. "I knew you'd be toting something like this—and you a cripple!" said Blaise. "Chariot's waiting at the curb. 'Swing low to carry you home.'"

Behind the wheel he added, "But why home? Any frozen stuff in that monster?" jerking his head toward the bag stored in the back seat of the car.

"No . . . but—"

"But nothing. Your father is up at Elderberry for sure. Air-conditioning is in order. And I've found a place out yonder that you'll like as much as I do—a regular hideout."

The word had for her a painful connotation which for a moment silenced and distracted her. That he took her silence as assent was evidenced by his in-

crease of speed and quick turning from the main street of the town. Bonnie Lou stepped back hastily from their crossing and blinked at what she saw. There was no chance to wave. They had not seen her or the tight paling of her face.

Blaise drove fast and Sophie, throwing back her head, breathed deep of the cool running air, which bore the smell of harvest, of full-leaved trees and sun-heated earth. There was a mist dimming the fierceness of the sky. No birds were singing; insects droned.

"I like this midsummer stuff," said Blaise, "but I take it from the expression of your face that you don't."

"I do sometimes. But it's not at its best today, it's feverish."

"It's good enough for me—right now."

"Where's your hideout?"

He had touched her knee with his gambler's hand and she drew away. That paled him. They swept on in silence, he not answering her question. He turned into a lane sunk deep between vine-covered banks. It led down to a swamp of curious growths, flycatchers and orchids, sweet bay—a perfumed jungle unexplored and strange. Then for an instant up again, the lane narrowing to a shady trail, and Blaise stopped. Stillness and heat fell upon them with brutal suddenness.

Blaise got out and she, after hesitating, opened her own door and joined him. He caught at her hand and drew her up the slope, and down it into a space circled by ancient pines, carpeted with the copper of pine needles. They sat down there, still silent, beneath the everlasting whisper of the trees so far above their heads. The air was tangy with evergreen and the faint, dry exhalations of the sun-soaked sand.

"Like it, Sophie?" he murmured wistfully.

"Yes."

"A lot?"

"A lot." And she gave a long, heart-shaken sigh.

He threw himself at length beside her, flopped over to rest his head against one arm, moving the free hand uncertainly to lie upon the softness of her lap. "Oh, my darling . . . my darling . . . my sweet darling. . . ." She heard him whisper, and his head was there beside her hand. She felt the exquisite tribute of his surrender, so that her eyes filled with tears and she laid her hands tenderly on this submissive head.

That touch was spark to drought. She was overtaken as by blown fire, a blaze that at once drew her to its heat and frightened her into tremulous withdrawal. But for an instant she had responded yearningly to the demands of the lean body near hers, the lips hot against her mouth, her throat, and now, overjoyed by that moment of acquiescence, Blaise held her fast. She caught at a branch and struggled to her feet, trying to free herself from him. Her fright was the ancient reaction of virginity, the nymph instinct for flight, but there was besides a sickness in her memory, a voice from nowhere, unrecognizable, that seemed to taunt her with her "desire for this assault." And it was as much self-horror and self-shame that tore her free and sent her flying from him up the slope past the waiting car and down, heedless of the increasing pain in her ankle, toward the swamp. There he overtook her. "Don't run—don't run from me, Sophie—don't!" And she fell on her knees, hiding her face and sobbing tearlessly.

Between hard breaths he told her, "Wait here, will you? I'll get the car. Don't try to ford—there might be moccasins. . . ." And presently he was back and helped her to the front seat. She had pulled together her blouse and straightened her skirts, but she was unable to control her trembling. Neither of them spoke. Blaise

drove at top speed, his profile set. He drew up before her gate but did not get down to help her out or even turn his head to watch her when, after a moment's hesitation, she went through the gate, up the path, and in at the familiar door. He did not move but sat bent over, gripping the wheel with pale-knuckled fingers. When at last he started the engine and drove slowly away, he had not once looked at the small house, its windows, its door that had been shut against him with a sound of finality.

The manservant who had come from Africa with Duncan Elder was, as Hattie had reported, "mighty tall." He had to bend his head to avoid the chandeliers which with their long crystals now sparkling clean decorated several of the Elderberry ceilings. When Peter served dinner formally every evening he had some difficulty bending to the limited height of the pantry doorway into the dining room. He had been trained in England by a friend of Duncan's stepfather who, on safari, had picked him up at the Research Center and taken him to London. Peter spoke correct English, more fluent but less formal than Duncan's own. He had returned to his former employers at the Center after his English master's death, only to find them both dead of an epidemic and the son whom he had known as a boy about to start on an expedition of his own. Young Duncan, en route to his American inheritance, was intent to carry serum to a native village. Instead of bringing the hope of life he had brought out of that expedition a dazed, skeleton self, at first hardly recognizable to Peter, patiently waiting for him at the designated port of rendezvous.

He was invaluable to Duncan, resurrecting a disordered memory, performing every household task to perfection and always with a care as meticulous and

considerate as that of a dedicated nurse. But there was one of Peter's habits that did not meet with Elder's approval. As to this he made a note in a journal he kept in the locked drawer of his laboratory desk.

Not long after Sophie's accident he sat at this desk with a long, narrow volume before him and a writing tool in his hand. The pages of the book were made of some exquisitely thin material, and his writing was as fine as the print of an insect's feet, very clear and written in the formal English of his speech. There were many pages already filled, and he riffled through them until he had reached the first uncovered space. He used no dates. The entries were a series of comments on things he had observed: notes on plants, animals, and humans, indistinguishable in approach as to species; the plants, however, receiving by far the most constant and careful treatment, the people the most complicated. Today he did not glance back of the open page but began at once to write.

Peter has been of great assistance. I am fortunate in this acquisition. Smoothed over the rough edges of my contacts with Them. He has given me valuable hints as to behavior . . . my necessary respect for and interest in Dr. Graeme, the correct fashion of making myself an acceptable citizen, etc. But he has one habit which gives me some concern. He is careful to conceal it from me, but not careful enough. He watches me . . . as I watch Them, as I make my notes on the curious customs and modes of thought and—may their god help them!—of *feeling* and of the inevitable acts that it provokes, so does he observe me, his master, with a peculiar, furtive intensity. What the motive for this incessant covert observation may be I cannot surmise. That it has any connection with my activities is unimaginable —they would be quite incomprehensible to him,

nor can he be in any doubt as to my authority. He was well acquainted with the prelude to that expedition and with all the arrangements, as well as with . . . myself. It is of no importance perhaps, but I am bound to consider it.

The other matter is more important. Two or three times of late I have been made aware of what seem like momentary lapses, if not of consciousness, at least of full awareness of my own acts and surroundings. Illness, which They would inevitably accept, may be, of course, discounted. So far one person only has brought the circumstance to my attention. . . . But before her curious account of seeing me where I was not, there had been one evening in the woods alone when I seemed to miss . . . something . . . as one's fingers might miss the key of a writing machine. For me, an impossible clumsiness. It was only a flash, but when it passed I did not quite know how or why I had come to that portion of my property. I have never let slip, never missed an instant or a detail of experience. . . . *That* is taboo.

There has been another incident, however, which suggests an undue sensitivity, almost a channel of subconscious communication between her consciousness and mine.

Here Duncan's writing tool hung suspended and was laid down. He sat in thought. There followed only scattered notes, jotted down to be elaborated on later.

Surviving messages along a disconnected nerve . . . a ghost impression, one might say . . . like the kick of a dead frog's legs or the writhing of a bisected serpent. Possible . . . if so, interesting. Of no intrinsic importance . . . will soon exhaust itself. But it makes the girl a creature to be closely watched. To be controlled . . . diverted. She is eminently suggestible. This must wait.

Rising, he went to the row of plants along the window shelf and observed each carefully, chewing thoughtfully several of the tiny new leaves as might a professional teataster, and making rapid notes the while. After about half an hour of this he went out to the terrace garden, where he paced up and down in his elliptical circuit until through the gap in the terrace wall he caught sight of a dim trail which seemed to tempt a passage. "It was by this," he thought, "that Sophie came to question me."

He pushed aside the full-leaved shrubs and made his way down to the brook. Above a small pool of spring water in its rotted wooden frame he lingered, looking and listening in his usually concentrated fashion so that no movement, no barely audible sound, should escape him. Then, seeing another opening above the pool, he took his silent progress where it led. After a few steps the tangled shrubbery stepped back and left a narrow allée arched and walled by dogwood trees and holly. At its ends, leaf-and-branch-framed, stood a latticework construction in which there was the opening of an absent door.

A girl sat on the floor of this arbor, her gay peasant skirt spread about her. Her delicate arms, left bare by the sheer white blouse, were lifted; her hands fingered tenderly some tiny objects on the bench. Her head was bent to watch this occupation; the dark russet hair fell across a profile that was pale and clear, and sad as a child's face may be when accepting a fate imposed by powers incomprehensible. She had an air of patient waiting.

Elder began with his noiseless steps to move up the slope under the arching boughs. She did not hear him until he spoke her name, and then she made a small, startled sound, turned, and looked up at him. He went at once into the arbor and placed himself on the bench

that ran around the eight sides of the building. Here were set out the tiny cups and saucers with which she had been playing.

"You see, I am trespassing again."

"I am glad your injury permits it. You were expecting to meet someone here?"

She flushed at that and lowered her deep, unhappy eyes. "No. What makes you think that?"

"Simply because you had, it seemed to me, a look of expectation."

"You must be psychic, Duncan. I was thinking of someone who used to meet me here." Her mouth bent into its charming crooked smile, but at once trouble straightened it.

"And that person," he asked, testing her memory, his eyes fastened upon her face with an icy intentness that an observer might have termed cruelty, "is . . . dead?"

"Perhaps you could think of him as dead."

Evidently this answer was a satisfactory one. It brightened his cold eyes.

"He used to help me when I was in trouble."

"And you are in . . . trouble?"

"No, not in trouble, but—troubled."

After a pause in which he seemed to dismiss his curiosity about her trouble, "What are these?" he asked, touching one of the little cups.

"It's a dolls' tea set. I left it here ages ago. I'd forgotten it. Poor little things, I used to play with them here, me and my dolls and—"

". . . and the lost friend." He finished for her as though he had stamped out a useless preoccupation. "You are looking for childhood, are you not? Are you a child or a woman, Sophie? If there is any difference between them."

By now, having seen him almost daily and having lost all memory of that conversation on the terrace

that had so roused her anger, she was used to his ordinary strangeness, and answered without surprise and with a twisted mouth, "Oh, certainly a woman. Why else should I be trying to be a child again?"

His cold gaze remained fixed upon what he could now see of her bent face. "Why are your lashes wet?" he asked.

She mocked him and herself with a small grimace. "Oh, I've been crying. Didn't you guess?"

"Tears." He seemed to make a scientific observation. He would study it later. "What," he asked, "do they mean to you?"

She answered half angrily, touching away the threaded drops, "Tears? You know what they mean, Duncan."

"That you are un-happy." Used with this small change of emphasis it was a different, a more negative word.

"Really—you must have cried often enough yourself."

"No. Never."

Astonishment made her forget to keep her face turned from him. "Oh, that's impossible. You've been a child, a boy, a man. You expect me to believe that you've been happy always every minute of the day and night?"

"No. I have never been happy."

There was an abrupt silence. In the arbor the wood sounds stirred as though coming to life. Sophie got slowly to her feet. "If you're not making fun of me or being ironic, Duncan—you're scaring me."

"That too? Something else that I have never been—afraid."

They looked at each other for a long, quiet moment, then, "Tell me why you are not happy. Is it about your father?" he asked.

She returned slowly to sit down on the bench. She had recovered from her momentary chill of fear, which was more astonishment than fear, for she did not believe him, imagined that he was practicing some sort of psychic discipline, like a Christian Scientist who denies the reality of any form of evil or sorrow or disease. She made a desperate gesture. "Yes . . . and because I've lost a friend . . . the first real friend I've ever had. And losing him . . . I suppose it's childish . . . has made me cry." A quick impression of Blaise's lean, dark face passed through her mind before she went on. "And then, in addition, I feel sort of . . . unsettled . . . lost." She laughed uncertainly ."I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

"You were running away, were you not?"

"I suppose so. I don't know where to turn. It's a strange, lonely feeling. I don't think I was ever so lonely before."

"Perhaps I can help. First—it is your father's state of health."

"Oh, Duncan, Dr. Sempel talked to me today. He said that Fa had had a very slight stroke some time ago. I didn't know that. It may recur. There's a condition . . . he says that Fa . . . may not . . . live long . . . he says that at any time . . . he may . . . die suddenly."

"Yes." The colorless syllable was no interruption, serving merely to evoke her further confidence.

"So I can think only of him."

"But there is someone else you find you must think of. I should surmise that to be a recent discovery."

Before the strength of that imperious gaze she felt that she was speaking to no ordinary man but to an authority, powerful, impersonal. She addressed herself as to a compelling emptiness. "It's strange that you should discover that. I feel as if I'd lost . . . someone

. . . I . . . love. But there's nothing . . . no one at all. It's like being in love . . . with nothingness . . . with empty space. No one at all. And yet, I seem to see his face . . . I feel as though he was with me. I hear his voice. I can't sleep."

"And this torment you call love!"

She spoke fiercely. "Oh, you've never felt it. I didn't know myself that it could be like this."

"Look at me, Sophie. Why do you turn your eyes away?"

She did look with an effort, and for a giddy instant she thought, "It can't be this man . . . he is not a man to love . . . I feel nothing for him . . . except . . . except something I can't find a name for. . . ." And she heard herself crying softly, with her wide eyes on his, "No, Duncan. No. No."

Her cry was caught up by a sudden strong wind that tore its way through the pines, thrashing their needled tops and showering bark and twigs upon the floor of the arbor. It came so violently, so without warning, that it thrust Sophie forward, whirling her about, and threw her fairly against him where he stood. Her hair blew across his mouth and she put up her hand to brush it away, sweeping his cheek.

Under her touch she felt its sudden glow, while his arms came strongly around her and she looked into that different face, young, the eyes golden, the mouth unbent from its rigidity, trembling almost into a smile. She had not time to speak or even to breathe—it was gone, and she felt herself thrust almost brutally away. She might have fallen if the wind had not held her on her feet.

"You must not do that," Duncan said.

Bewildered, she stared at him, her hands pushing her hair back from her forehead, and turning from the

stone-hard face of his repulsion, quick and quiet as a startled bird, she fled.

In his journal that evening the master of Elderberry made a triumphant entry.

> I was able to forestall and to prevent another experience of loss of consciousness by thrusting from me Sophie's physical approach. My reaction came in time to save me from the sort of spasm which I now realize is occasioned by her nearness or her contact. For an instant I felt a dizziness and that absence of full awareness, but I overcame it *instantly* by prompt action. The child fled from me and I am sure will have learned her lesson.
>
> I must, in fact, in some measure reassure her, for it is imperative for me to keep track of her reactions. In my research pattern she is a dangerous element. Her father's friendship for me, indeed his almost passionate dependence upon me, must be fostered so that I may have the freedom of her house and, in case of need, a means of bringing her to mine. She must be under my control—as *he* most certainly continues to be. There is no positive evidence of *his* emergence in *her* experience unless in the dim fashion of a dreamy preoccupation with the boy in the portrait. And, after all, that is in *my* image. I am assured of her entire loss of any recollection of her visit to the terrace, certain of her release from the obsessive fantasy concerning Ree—and the "boy" who has appeared to her in the woods. The child, in truth, has become my plaything and my second tool.

Chapter 8

The wind that had blown Sophie into the arms of her strange neighbor was the outer fringe of a small twister that had writhed its narrow, ruinous way across the pine hills, tearing off a few lowly roofs, overturning a shed or two, cutting a brutal swathe across the forested miles, frightening a score of people, but doing no fatal harm to any human creature. To Sophie perhaps more than to anyone, although she had been barely touched.

"They are the same . . . they are the same. . . ." Like a nightmare voice the phrase repeated itself to her, sitting up in her bed, knees in her hands, head bent, shrinking from the very darkness. "They are the same. . . ." And the discovery, if it did not mean madness, was abhorrent to her as well as terrifying.

She told herself, "The face could not have been real. . . . Duncan could not look like that. The im-

pression was too brief to be convincing. It had been . . . it must have been the creation of my own intense longing for those eyes, that mouth, that smile." The memory of the brutality that followed whipped her pride, which for an instant had so surrendered to his strong embrace.

And in the very midst of her laborious refusal to believe, the changed face would hover before her with its glow, its warmth, its strong beauty, the humanity of its smile that had had no time to complete itself, and she felt again in her agonized darkness that momentary sense of security, of happiness, of a peace beyond the peace of her unawakened solitude, a peace that was in itself an ecstasy.

Before daybreak, she could bear her conflict no longer and swallowed one of the pills Dr. Sempel had left with her in case the pain of her ankle should disturb her rest. Slowly the night seemed to soften around her, her brain let go of its frenzied hold, her anger, her terror, her ecstasy, melted into nothingness. But out of this nothingness some part of her consciousness entered into a dream world.

She lay on a couch in Duncan's laboratory, and she heard the words of an incantation, a humming music, and the sound of drums. The words of the incantation reached her mind as though they passed through some interpretive medium, and the words were these, monotonously repeated, beating upon her brain like waves upon a beach, again, again, again! "You will forget . . . you will forget . . . there is no Ree. . . . There is no Ree. . . . No Ree . . . no Ree . . . no Ree . . ."

She tried to lift her hands to her ears, her head moved on the pillow, and fighting the sedative, she flung herself from that dream couch and woke. She was on her knees beside her bed, praying frantically

for Ree. . . . The words of her dream were still with her, and the sound of distant drums.

The voice of her own prayer woke her fully, and she rose, went to the bathroom, and splashed cold water on her face. Back in her bedroom she stood at her window, opened it wide, and looked out. It was a clear night, no movement anywhere, but a sky alive with stars. They shifted as though they came tremulously toward her. There was no wind. She could see the trees of Elderberry beyond the lane, their greenness faintly visible. They were standing still under the bending stars. She was released from her heavy sadness, her sense of loss. She wanted to go out, to be part of the night. She wondered why people were content to hide away from this different world possessed by all the neglects of day, by all the promise of foreverness. It seemed to her that a priestess stood dark and patient, ignored, beyond the windowpanes. And within the pane within her own quiet mind she was remembering her talk on the terrace, her errand to Elderberry—which had nothing to do with a book—the reason for her accident, and Peter lifting her up to carry her into the room, to lay her on that couch. She realized that she had been hypnotized by Duncan Elder. His words repeated themselves to her wakened mind: "You will forget . . . you will forget . . . there is no Ree . . . there is no Ree. . . ." And she *had* forgotten and she *had* forsaken that desperate prisoner. Dr. Sempel's drug for some reason had had the effect of waking some tranced and deadened area of her brain.

There was here a mystery incapable of her solution, but this she knew: Some living creature, not the Duncan of her father's friendship or of her own fear, had come to her, had been able to reach her through *his*—that other's—flesh, against the power of *his*—that other's

—mastery, had come to her for help and for love . . . for love.

Down there below her, moving along the lane beyond the hedge, someone came dimly into view, a tall figure in a long light coat. She knew at once that it was Duncan Elder, and drew back quickly from the open sash as though he might see her standing to look after him as he went by. Could he beckon her down? Had he that power? The fear she had always felt for him had enormously intensified itself. And yet . . . that changed face . . . She pushed back her hair. "I must not think of it . . . I must wait . . . something will help me . . . there will be some explanation . . . I must wait."

The clock in the hall was striking four, so Duncan had probably been out all night. What could he do at such hours—see, search for, find? Blaise had been right: she would not always be safe with that man alone . . . not with that man . . . no . . . but there was another. Stop thinking of that . . . wait . . . wait. . . .

But she was unable to shake herself free from that fearful being. She had seen a soul in chains. When the face so close to hers had changed she had felt as though a high and narrow bridge across some necessary passage to a promised land shook under her feet.

After a while she returned slowly to her bed, turning back to the window as she went, listening to the stillness as though she expected a message from the wind or a warning from the pines. Instead, there came a low human summons. "Are you here, Sophie? Are you here. . . ?"

She was at the window again, a hand against her plunging heart. "I'm here . . . I'm here."

Out there only a few steps away, against a background of trees, a face glimmered, a pale and groping face. She could see nothing but its pallor, which moved

swiftly toward her, and all at once her hands, grasping the windowsill, were covered by strong and eager hands, real, human, living as her own. The hands of a man strong and young. "Sophie, I've found you. Where have you been? Speak to me. Keep me. Come closer. Your face . . . your eyes—Oh, God, I love you. Be quick, be quick. . . ."

In the pale beginning of dawn light she distinguished him, and moving closer, every line and tint and feature of his face: Duncan's but not Duncan's, the boy's in the portrait but not the boy's—the face rather of a desperate young man, his eyes, under dark, level brows, seeming to drink thirstily at hers.

"Tell me quickly who you are," she whispered, thankful for Fa's medicated sleep.

The answer came doubtfully. "I'm Ree . . . you told me. . . ."

"No. That's not your name. Listen—"

"Hold me. Hold me," he prayed, and turning her hands under his she wrapped her fingers around them, held them fast. "You are Duncan Elder," she told him. "That is your name."

The splendid eyes fastened on her, narrowed. He moved his head slowly from side to side, looked once about him, and she felt a tremor in his hands.

"Elder . . . Elder . . . these are the Elderberry woods . . . and you are Sophie. I remember . . . I think I can remember . . . I am beginning to . . . but it won't stay. Sophie, call me, touch me, look for me . . . don't let me go. . . ." And with that, the icy hands drew away from her unavailing grasp, the face stiffened, a spasm crossed it, he went back, and dimly she saw him stumble across the open ground, break through the low hedge, and moving uncertainly, cross the lane, vanish into the woods above its farther bank.

She called fearfully. The stiff face, the cold hands,

were not his—they were that other's, that other's, whose purpose she was called upon to fight with all her strength, whose icy will she must melt with her own burning purpose, whose strength she must measure against her own. And in her memory that other towered, greatly her superior in intellect and will and knowledge, in immense, incomprehensible power. She felt small and weak sitting on her bed, her head thrown back, her hands pressed down, clenched at her sides, but there was a great fire in her weakness and a dauntless will to save. The voice besought her courage: "Sophie, call me, touch me, look for me . . . don't let me go. . . ."

The small house hidden beneath its trees was kept clean of spider webs by the broom of Hattie May, but in its kitchen and in one of its little low-ceiled bedrooms a human tapestry was being spun. Sophie wove busily—while her hands washed the dishes, or when she sat, her head in her hands, beside her bedroom window, or when in the woods and lanes she braved their loneliness and sometimes whispered to the whispering of the long green needles of the pines.

The seventeen-year-old girl, practiced in self-control and in a nurse's diplomacy, with a courage that was native to her blood and an imagination as Celtic as her face, was looking at danger and planning a campaign. She went about this as carefully as any rescuer of a war prisoner in an enemy's land. She must not betray to the master jailer of Elderberry the return of her memory or any awareness of the hypnotic trance. *Be careful, Sophie!* So she would speak to her anxious heart.

It would not be wise to provoke any further such attempts at hypnosis, and she must be on her guard

against them. *Watch, watch, watch—never stop watching.*

In order to help that prisoner she must endure the terror of his master's nearness. She must even invite him, seek him out. . . . *Stop shaking, Sophie, or you'll drop a plate.*

In order to free that prisoner, she must as often as possible summon Ree—for so she still called him in her carefulness—daring the violence and the shame of a repulse.

Any discovery, any knowledge she might acquire of this mysterious captivity, she must conceal. If it had been possible for her to recognize an illness she might have advised her neighbor to go to a psychiatrist or a neurologist for help. This she dared not do. The superior genius of the master was too formidable, too horribly, incredibly, superhumanly sane. With his unchanged composure he was capable of she could not guess what icy clearheaded destructiveness—toward the captive in his power, toward her father, toward herself.

She must keep watch for any sign of her awareness of the boy's escape. So far, she decided, Elder had not really become conscious of this. He was, however, suspicious of her account of the strange wandering boy she had met with in the woods. She must not undeceive Duncan, by so much as a daring word, as to the effectiveness of his hypnotic prohibition. "There is no Ree . . . you must forget." She must seem to accept his explanation as to her hallucinations, her self-hypnosis, the unreality of the actual physical presence of Ree.

Above all, and to this she came back again and again as though dragging chains, she must steel herself to seeing him, to being with him, to evoking by whatever dangerous means the return of Ree—even to prolonging of the contacts. For that was what the strange

young man had asked of her. "Call me"—his resonant and trusting voice was in her ear—"touch me, look for me . . . don't let me go." And who should know better than he the imperative necessity for that recall?

Sometimes she prayed for help, sometimes she cried, often she trembled. To love and to fear, to pity and to hate the same being in such a different and in such an identical form . . . her intense emotions tearing through her life to some tremendous climax, a channeled current running toward a release or an engulfing death. . . . At times her mind sank beneath the uncanny terror of it.

If there had been someone to turn to, if she were not so terribly alone. . . . Ah, there was Ree—her love, her lover, the very reason for her life. Let that be enough.

Returning from one of her desperate wanderings, Sophie walked into the lane that led to her front door when Blaise seemed to spring up from the earth.

"Speak to me," he said.

She stopped in front of the honeysuckle and berry bushes of Mr. Hildreth's meadow, in which two drowsy old hunters nibbled grass. Blaise had vaulted the fence to reach her.

Sophie stood, not knowing what to say or even to feel, but with a startled welcome in her eyes.

"I'm leaving Little Sandy. I've got to go to Arizona. Dan's pulling out. Selling the house, horses, everything. The doctor says Mamma needs drier air. Suddenly she's . . . worse."

He wore so set and pale a face that her uncomfortable memory of their last meeting faded and she put her hand on his rigid arm. "Oh, Blaise—your mother! I'm so sorry." But beyond her sympathy stirred a vast relief, for "this her friend that had been lost was found."

To her astonishment his eyes filled. He flung the tears off with a sweep of his fingers. "I want you to know. . . . Damn it! You look awfully white, Sophie. That's my fault."

"No."

"Then remember this, for God's sake. . . . I never cared . . . I never felt like this before . . . not for any girl. I want you . . . I want you . . . for always. . . . *You* know, Sophie . . . for a . . . for my wife." The word came as though torn from him. "Don't answer. I don't want you to say anything . . . not now. For Chrissake, don't I know you hate me."

"No, Blaise. I love you. I do."

"Oh, God, not like *that!* But the way I've *got* to make you love me. If I hadn't—didn't I warn you?—if I hadn't . . . gone at you like that, I might have had a chance."

She spoke wistfully. "Please, can't you be my friend? I haven't any friends. I've missed you terribly."

He stood still, staring at the ground where a tiny white flower stared back at him. "I can't, Sophie. I tried that, you know. But"—here he tossed her that unique smile—"but by God, I can hope, can't I. I can wait. . . ."

The strange terror of her secret suddenly took her breath. She knew a loneliness that seemed not of this world at all, a cosmic desolation. And he was leaving her. They stood in silence, hearing the rise and fall of insect voices and the rustle of birds.

"I'll be back later to close things up here, but before I go now . . . Sophie, will you let me kiss you once?" She put up her face like a baby and he kissed her gently, carefully, on the mouth, bent his head for an instant to her shoulder, and turned away. Her fingers had clutched his sleeve like a scared child's.

The click of the closing gate startled them. It was Duncan Elder.

He was coming toward them along the lane. He never smiled, so that his gravity gave them no warning, and he spoke with no more than his usual measured formality.

"I was saying good-bye to your father, Sophie, when he saw you and LeClerc here. You were visible from the door—a gap in the trees. What it was that so disturbed him I cannot be sure, but he raised his arms and gave a cry, something about, "like lovers," and he dropped down on the floor. He is lying there now. He is not unconscious, but he seems unable to speak understandably. One can distinguish his intention, perhaps."

Sophie ran, Blaise at her heels. Elder hesitated a moment, then slowly followed. Just inside the door in the shabby hall Conrad lay on his back. His face was flushed, his eyes were open, he seemed to struggle with his thickened tongue. Sophie knelt beside him. "Blaise, phone Dr. Sempel. Fa's had . . . stroke." She lifted his heavy right hand, which slipped from hers. The other plucked with a sort of fury at her sleeve. His face was drawn down on one side.

"Please, Fa dear, lie still. Don't try to move, to talk. Blaise will get the doctor. We'll carry you to bed."

The sounds then became clearly negative, and when the young man bent to lift him he tried to strike Blaise's hands away. But they got him as far as the sofa in the sitting room, and Sophie knelt there again beside him.

"Did you get the doctor, Blaise?"

"He's on his way."

"You'd better go, then. You see . . . it makes Fa worse to have you here. Please."

Blaise stepped back unwillingly toward the door.

His eyes begged for hers, but she could see nothing at the moment but Conrad's face, pale now and woefully distorted, one hand beating itself against the sofa edge. "Fa, darling . . . he was . . . just saying good-bye," she murmured. "He's leaving Little Sandy."

Blaise said, "I'll wait outside."

"No, please, go . . . go home. Duncan, will you be good enough to stay? The doctor will need your help to get Fa to bed. I'll let you know, Blaise. . . ." But she did not look around to see that he had disappeared and that she and Elder were alone in the sad room.

When Sophie came out with Dr. Sempel to her porch and stood holding back her hair from her temples the better to listen to his instructions, she was astonished to see Duncan at the gate. He had left the house as soon as Graeme had been put to bed. Shaken and exhausted, distracted from every preoccupation but that of her father's illness, her impulse was one of gratitude. "You haven't been here all this time?" she asked when they were alone and she had come down to the gate to stand beside him. "That was"—she looked up searchingly into his face—"that was *kind.*"

She put out her hand to touch him in the way she had in moments of emotion but quickly withdrew it, half turning from him.

He said with all his grave dignity, "What I can contribute to your need is at your service in any way, great or small."

She swung back to face him, her eyes on his, which seemed to gleam now at her through the dying light, capturing her look as a boy closes his careful fingers about a doomed butterfly. She was conscious of a silent conflict, she groping for the human heart of him, and he—for power. Another memory cast its flash of light upon her effort; the impression she had brought from

her first meeting with this cold-eyed heir of Elderberry—that of a smothered need for rescue or compassion. She must reach it; she must dare to waken its consciousness in him.

"I think," she said softly, fighting an undertow of fear, "I think, Duncan, that perhaps sometimes you know that *you* need *me*."

At that the pupils of his eyes possessed their iris, turning the gray stone into black ice, and another sort of flash half blinded her vision of that memory. It was not anger that now confronted her, there was no heat, nothing but force, and without a quiver of dismay or astonishment she found herself moving past him out of the gate, beside him along the lane. So she went until they came to the familiar stile, where she sat down, weak from the shocks and the restraints of the long day. She had eaten little, and her very courage had made its inroads on her strength.

Duncan stood below her step, but his height took away her advantage as she looked up at him. She was now, however, to some degree herself, and that warning of her own to "watch, watch, watch" was coming back to her. The whisper of the pines above her counseled her in ancient friendliness.

She bent forward, elbows on knees, hiding her face. Against this darkness his face stood out white and clear, and she stared at it until it faded out. Then she stood up. "I must go back to Fa," she said. "Thank you for your kind offer." To steady her descent from the stile, for she was dizzy and uncertain, she touched an involuntary hand to his shoulder. She felt the shudder of his revulsion and instantly withdrew the gesture, and finding herself on the good earth spoke recklessly. "Why can't you bear to be touched? It's inhuman. I can't understand it . . . unless, for some reason, it makes you . . . afraid."

At this through the gathered darkness he fastened upon her a look so stark and so intent that she uttered a gasp of "Good night. I must get back," and went quickly past him toward the low, tree-hooded shelter of her house.

It was not until she was in her room behind a closed door, standing rigid in the dark, that she realized what she had done. Under those terrible eyes she had half broken her own resolution, she had all but ignored her own command to keep the secret. From her few words Duncan Elder, the master, might now be sure of his prisoner's escapes.

She fell on her knees beside the bed. What would that mean? What terrible effect might that knowledge have upon the fate of . . . Ree?

Chapter 9

Left alone, Duncan Elder crossed the deserted stile and made his thoughtful way back to his house. There he paced the hall under its crystal lights, his hands clasped behind his back in a preoccupation so intense that an hour passed unheeded. At last he went into his laboratory, switched on his desk light, and made a record of his self-communion.

A puzzling encounter. I must now thread my way through the labyrinth of a woman's mind. In our so-much-further-advanced civilization, women by long disuse of their special functions, now atrophied, are indistinguishable as a separate sex. This child Sophie is constantly moved by her emotions, easily influenced through them, but at the same time seems capable of a feline subtlety, of an animal obstinacy. She cannot, of course, understand our taboo against all physical demonstra-

tion, the centuries-old penalty for any sexual advance or contact, but she is puzzled by my perhaps too-evident revulsion from her touch. That this revulsion should betray the other astonishing effect would seem to be hardly possible. But her assertion tonight of my positive "need" of her, the suggestion of *fear* on my part; what do these extraordinary comments mean? Can they in any way suggest a surmise as to *his* survival? Has she any suspicion of his actual existence, distinct and independent of my own? I will not admit such a fantastic peril. It would be entirely outside all her human limitations of possible experience. This possibility was discounted entirely in the Chief's choice of an emissary. I could wish only that we had more nearly perfected our methods before any further investigation became imperative—but there was no time. The emergency is now so acute that there can be no failure. Upon the success of my mission depends our continued existence.

If there have been intrusions, and the child Sophie has become aware of some expression, some appeal—if I clearly understood this possible development, it would not be too difficult to limit further the vitality I reserved in the jungle for my use. The predicament must become a most important part of my report, and if it should cause disaster, then indeed for me . . . *Amertu,* or the cyclic death. There is no precedent for me to follow, no instruction to cover such an eventuality. I must feel my way, discover my own solution. There are, of course, great difficulties, since I have vital need of his sense tools. But with my own vast superiority it should not be too difficult. I must especially study S. G. more closely. I must test her, undermine her resistance, her will to independent action. She may have recognized to some extent the power I am already exerting over her will. There were signs of that resistance.

This child, this embryo, this bewildered little savage—how can she, even in her most deluded dreams, imagine herself capable of standing in the way of my purpose? What gives her such temerity? No mental process certainly—an instinct, animal, prehistoric, hopeless.

It would be strange indeed to find in this mite an obstruction, even perhaps a danger, in my path.

He had been thinking so intensely of the "child, the mite, the little savage" that he almost felt again the revulsion caused by the touch of her hand, and pushing back the book, he arose and moved toward the windowsill. It seemed to him that it took a curiously long time to make those three steps across the floor, and when he stood still he was not close to the window but back before his desk. The page of his latest entry in its fine, needlelike script lay before him, but sprawling across it, a bold, heavily inked pen had printed in words underlined and splashed as though in strong emotion: *"I AM ALIVE."*

After an interminable time of rigidity the tall, pale man sat down again, examined the penholder in the tray placed before his arrival by Hattie May, saw that it was stained with fresh black ink, and dropped it into a wastebasket beside his chair. Then he did this strange thing: He set his right elbow firmly on the desk so that the forearm stood up in front of him like a separate creature, and upon this erect and open hand he fixed his analytic, steady gaze, as though he were examining a specimen in order to plan its scientific vivisection.

For Bonnie Lou Hicks, Little Sandy at this time had become too small. Her mother was startled by bursts

of ill temper and uncharacteristic insolence. Bonnie's younger brother, Ned, teased and was smartly slapped, the dove eyes hardened, smoldered, and the demure pale face looked sharp and strained. She found a hundred things to criticize in her parents' management of their own affairs as well as of their children's.

"Why do you let that tiresome kid tag along after Mr. Elder?" she scolded. "He must be sick of the sight of him. Besides, you don't know what kind of a guy that Elder is anyways. You don't know what he may be teaching the brat."

"He's teaching him nature study," Mrs. Hicks said defensively. "Mr. Elder sure enough thinks the world of him. And he gets his invitation straight from the horse's mouth. Mr. Elder mightn't be so pleased to see *you* trespassin' on his acres, at that."

"Plenty he'd care. He's not like other folks. I wonder," mused the incorrigible Bonnie, "if he ever kissed a girl in all his life."

Mrs. Hicks at once fell into the changed mood. "He's right handsome," she said dreamily, putting down a wet plate in the forlorn hope that her daughter, wandering about the kitchen, would deign to dry it. "I reckon any girl that gets him is in luck."

"I'd like to put a stick of dynamite under him. . . . Bong!" said Bonnie Lou viciously, and drifted from the kitchen out of her mother's sight.

As she left the gate, the inevitable gay scarf tucked into her belt rather than wrapped around her head as usual, she saw Bulkie shouldering his way toward her and started quickly back, making a getaway over a fence across a field and so into the Elderberry woods.

Her mind had been diverted by her mother's reference to Duncan Elder as a matrimonial prospect. She had not thought of him for weeks even in the light of a possible flirtation, and her impulse to blow him up

with dynamite gave her a half-mischievous intention. She chose at random one of the horse trails that threaded the pine woods. It took her on noiseless feet toward the sound of running water, and presently stopping short with a little shock of pleased surprise she did see below her Duncan Elder himself. He was kneeling beside the water engaged in some experiment with a long straw; coatless, hatless, sleeves rolled up, he bent over his busy hands. She stood for a minute watching him with a sly, naughty look on her face. Presently she sauntered down the long, gradual bank, and coming close, let herself down beside him, sitting back on her heels and looking with a childlike sweetness into his face. He had turned it toward her as though she had been expected, but he said nothing. "Hi, Mr. Elder, what you doing, uh?" she asked so exactly in Ned's manner that any other man might have laughed aloud. "Did you hear me coming down yonder through the trees?" she asked, putting a hand on his arm to beg for attention as a pet dog might with his urgent paw.

He moved away a trifle. "Yes. You are looking for your brother? He has just left me, going home, I imagine. It must be near suppertime."

"You're just a little boy yourself, Mr. Elder, playing in the water. O-oh, what's that horrid-looking old thing?"

"It's a larva looking for a ladder. He wants to climb up into the air. He's about to split down his back and climb out of it as a new creature much prettier than the old one. He'd better be quick—he's late in the season for this trick, and he may not be able to get his wings dry before sunset. I am trying to induce him to use my straw—there now! He has it. Look at those claws. Very soon they will be dead hands and his climbing body will be a dry shell. It will hang there below

him as he flies above it like a rainbow in the air—for a brief time before his second death."

"Gosh, you talk right pretty, don't you? I can see why Ned likes to tag along with you. You know a lot about nature, don't you? Is that what you do—your profession, I mean—or is it just a hobby?"

He was absorbed in watching the climbing insect and did not answer. She spoke softly through her teeth, as a love-drunk mother speaks to her baby. "Gosh, you're cute. I'm crazy about you like you are now . . . just like a little boy," and she straightened to her knees beside him, put one hand against his further cheek, and as his face turned unwillingly toward her, pressed her small breasts against him and set her mouth richly, eagerly, upon his own.

An instant later she lay on her back against the sloping bank, her hands clutching the grass. Elder had risen to his feet and with the same motion had flung her from him as though a noxious insect had stung his lips. He spoke one word: *"Amertu."* And without so much as a glance at her plight he bent over the stream and began to rinse his mouth, drawing in the water and spitting it out again and again, splashing his face as though against some vile contagion.

Bonnie Lou got to her feet. She was as much scared as she was angry, but she stammered, "Wh-why did you do that? Wh-what did you mean by it? Nobody was ever so mean, nobody ever did treat me so mean before. . . ." Tears of rage and mortification rushed into her eyes. "I know a lot of boys," she said through her teeth, "that'd beat you up *good* for that."

He rose and came toward her. His wet hands were held out before him like a murderer's, thought Bonnie, but there was no expression in his face. Before she could turn and run he had put one of those icy iron hands upon her, and holding her so, he used the other

methodically to tear off her scant flimsy clothes, the brief nylon shorts, the sleeveless blouse. Her struggles he ignored, and lifting her like a puppet he plucked off her sneakers and threw them with the other things to the ground. Then, dropping her, he rubbed his hands together as though to clean them.

She doubled over her nakedness and ran close to the ground toward the nearest thicket, looking over her shoulder with a puppy's whimper as she fled. He spoke after her, not looking, his voice cold, even, emotionless, "Go down into your hole, animal," he said, "and find your Adama, if that's what you need."

She crouched hidden in the bushes and did not stir till all sight and sound of him had been lost and the woods were becoming dark. Then she crept out, shaking and crying, gathered up what she could find of her torn clothes, held them about her, and so managed by way of hedged fields and wooded lanes to get to her house unseen and upstairs to her small bedroom, which had never in her too-adventuresome young life seemed so dear a sanctuary. She bundled her clothes into a closet, slipped into a cotton frock, and lay down on her bed, smothering her frantic crying into a pillow. She relived that experience in terror that seemed to intensify itself with every breath.

When her mother called her for supper she tried to get up, but her head swam and her knees buckled. Mrs. Hicks found her sitting on the edge of her bed, her wild head bent down to her knees.

But with all her questioning Mrs. Hicks could discover nothing except that Bonnie Lou was all tired out and didn't know but what she might be coming down with a chill or something.

"Where's your scarf?" the mother scolded. "Don't you know Doctor said you'd get heat prostration if you went without it?"

"I reckon I lost it," murmured Bonnie Lou, shaking, "somewhere in the woods."

It had been Sophie's intention to encourage Duncan Elder's visits to her house, but now, with no invitation, he became a constant visitor. He would send Peter down with books and fruit. These books Conrad, propped against a mountain of pillows, could read, when they were set up on a rack provided by his neighbor. And Duncan would talk about their contents. Better than anyone he was able to understand the jumbled words Conrad was increasingly able to utter. Between Sophie and Duncan at this time there existed a sort of unspoken truce, as though each were gathering strength for the next move. By the calm courtesy of his behavior she had been reassured as to any dangerous result of her rash accusation of "need" or "fear" where she was concerned. But at night, standing by her window in vain and calling a name softly in the shadow of the pines, when there was no reply, the ache in her heart constantly increased in its intensity, and with it, a terrible fear. Had the master after all been warned by her impulsive speech and been able to deepen the dungeon of his captive or even—God help her—to destroy him?

So she was driven at last to Elderberry Mansion, where it might be dangerously possible to try again the power of her touch. This experiment she was afraid to attempt in the small house because of her father's watchfulness—for watch he did, with an almost imperious yearning in his eyes. Duncan's constant and filial attentions had given new fuel to his smoldering hopes. He had tried to keep Sophie near him during Duncan's visits at his bedside, he had watched them through his open door. It was only too evident to her what was in his impatient mind.

Today she carried a book under her arm as she set out with a white, resolute face for Elderberry. The old dreamy magic of the woods began its work upon her as soon as she left the hidden stile behind her. It had been many days since she had been able to leave her house. She trod lightly, her head moving this way and that, as though she watched and waited for a familiar presence. Something melted away inside her, a hardness of maturity and pain.

She went along the garden wall to the front door and was admitted by Peter, who disappeared to find his master. In the dark wainscoted hall she stood and looked up at the portrait, and when Duncan came down the stairs he, too, after their greetings, turned toward the painted face.

"So you were communing with your playmate, your Ree?"

Her heart missed a beat. They both looked at the narrow, level-eyed young face.

He said, "I think it is the portrait of Harmon Elder when he was a lad."

"Your father?"

He bowed in assent.

"I've brought you back your book. Fa thought you might be missing it. It's the plant-food one."

"Thank you." He put the volume down and did not change the subject of their former conversation. "And the day when you came into this house alone you were startled by this boy—thinking he was real, thinking that he had . . . come back. . . ?"

"Yes." She was hardly able to speak and was watching him under her eyelashes. "I . . . I even cried aloud . . . his name."

"Ah yes. Ree—am I right? What a quaint name. Perhaps," he went on, "perhaps he did come back."

"What do you mean?" She steadied her voice with an effort.

"Perhaps it is the portrait not of the father but of the son."

"You mean . . . of yourself?"

Again he bowed. "My memory has not been quite normal since my illness and the trek through the jungle, but it seems to me this was painted from a photograph sent to my father from Africa. There must be somewhere in Little Sandy someone who would know. Your father? The real estate man? Others? I have found a package of letters among some papers mailed to me from Africa—letters signed 'Your loving father,' and in them he writes constantly of 'little Sophie Graeme.' "

"You mean he wrote about me to you, Duncan?" No manner he might have chosen would have put her so off her self-appointed guard as this almost dreamy one of confidence.

"His letters are full of you, your beauty, your loveliness, your sweet and funny ways, the games you played, the things you said, his adoration of you. He would like, it would seem, though this was expressed playfully, nothing better than that his son should love this little girl as 'I love her,' and someday—yes, so he writes—come here to the old place and marry her. . . . So, if this is the portrait of the boy, Duncan, it may be that he was often with you and that you knew him for your friend, your playfellow . . . your Ree."

"Duncan!" Sophie had stepped back and sat down on a large settee that stood near the portrait. "How strange! It makes me feel sort of weak . . . I don't know why. I know you've guessed that Fa has had the same idea . . . still has. . . ." She flushed. It seemed to her that they had come into a dangerous place and

that it was too late to turn back. However, she stood up. "I must get home. Hattie will have to leave."

"Wait a moment. Will you come into the book room? I should like to give you those letters. You might find in them some reference to the portrait. There is even a small picture of you." His manner, though astonishing, had reassured her as never before in his presence, and she went with him into the room. The walls were lined with book shelves almost from ceiling to floor, but in a narrow space there were drawers with brass handles, and from one of these he took out the package of letters and handed it to her.

"I don't think you should give them to me, Duncan. I mean, they're part of your inheritance."

"And so . . . in a sense," he said, looking into her eyes, "are you."

"Not quite that, Duncan."

"It may be that a young lad in Africa was with you often here in your summerhouse and beside your brook, which were someday to be his, getting to know you, sharing as a big boy might, I should imagine, in your little games, protecting you by his greater strength and age."

"Do you believe in that sort of thing . . . I mean, in telepathy and extrasensory perceptions?"

"Of course."

His new fashion of identifying himself in this half-veiled fashion with the boy in the portrait moved and disarmed her. Perhaps that prisoner had gained some measure of liberty or of control. Perhaps he would gradually emerge with no terror, no desperation. She found herself murmuring, "I'd like to think it was you . . . before you turned away from . . . from life . . . to join that strange brotherhood. . . . It would make us friends. I hope"—here her eyes filled, and she put out her hand but dared not touch his sleeve—"I hope

it will be like that . . . a lifelong friendship. . . . " But even as she said it pain gripped her heart. The boy, the beautiful young lover—did this mean that he would vanish, that he would not in that guise ever come back to her? But she managed to go on in a tremulous, uncertain voice, "I hope it will be like that, a lifelong friendship. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

He stood looking down at her, and there began to be a struggle in his face. It crossed his features. It was gone. "I do not know what it means to be a friend or to have one," he said in a low, different key.

"Then," said Sophie gently, looking at him with all the Celtic tenderness of her gray eyes, "then I'll have to teach you, Duncan."

He cried out in a loud, strong voice, "Not that! Not that!" The cry beat against the scholarly walls and clapped the ceiling.

Peter appeared in the open door. "You were calling, sir. Is anything wrong?"

Duncan said quickly, "Will you see Miss Graeme to the door? I am—I must be alone. . . ."

Laying the bundle of letters down on a table top, she gave him one swift, scared, searching look. His face, like one reflected in shaken water, trembled.

Peter was waiting. He stood aside and she moved past him into the hall.

Duncan stood alone in the room. The tremor of his face took possession of his body with a violence that made him stagger and reach for support. He sat down, leaned forward, put his hands about his head, clasping the fingers in his thick dark hair. He began to mutter to himself and to stamp one foot as though in a frenzy of impatience, like that of a parent practicing difficult forbearance with a rebellious child. And once he groaned aloud. The sound startled him, he jerked back his head, rose, and quickly left the room.

Chapter 10

Sophie was walking slowly down the driveway, but as she reached the first turn in the road she hastened her steps. At once she caught the sound of following feet. The courage in her forced her to turn about, and as she did so, strong arms caught her and a voice spoke in her ear. "Don't run from me. . . ." It might have been Blaise speaking. "Don't run, my darling—you're safe with me, you know." And he laughed.

She found herself sobbing, clinging with both hands. Here in the strong summer light he was as real as life itself, as the ground beneath her feet. It was that other who was not real. "Where have you been? Are we safe here?"

"Don't ask me. Don't waste our time. I am remembering. . . . There was a fire . . . and dark faces watching me . . . and I was dying . . . I knew that I was dying. The fever had left me, and in that sickness

it means the end. The heart gives out. And I can see now the stars above me and the firelight moving . . . then everything went black . . . I was blind. . . . I thought of you, Sophie . . . and I told myself I'd never get to you. You'd never know. . . . I could hear my own breath . . . the way it sounds when you are dying. . . . And it stopped. I think I sat up, dropped back . . . something seized me . . . I said, *This is death.*"

She whispered, "What was it? What was it?"

"Life . . . love . . . I'm here with you."

"How can I help you? How can I keep you here? Who is . . . he . . . that other one?"

"Hush." His mouth fell upon hers, and that mouth was all of her that lived. Consciousness returned at the dreadful sudden coldness of his lips, the stiffness of his body as it shuddered away from hers, and the hands that had been pressed against her shoulders moved up, crept to fold about her throat. She pulled back and heard him gasp, "Run . . ." fighting for breath. "Don't look back . . . don't stop. Run. . . ."

She plunged at once into the shelter of the woods with noiseless steps across the needled, sandy ground, running in terror, in agonized frustration, and—in ecstasy. Ecstasy—the kiss, the laughter, the sun upon his bright hair and on his strong young throat; frustration—the chill withdrawal of his lips; terror—the creeping coldness of those fingers at her throat.

Returning to the house after a dazed discovery of unexpected surroundings—for he had been in the bookroom, and with no awareness of change he had found himself standing in the middle of the driveway halfway down to the gate—Duncan went to his desk, and with a steady hand and an air of complete composure, began to write:

I have tried an experiment. I thought that by identifying myself in Sophie's mind with her wanderer, I might subdue or redirect her power of evocation, convince her of the unreality of a separate identity called Ree. I have failed. Yes, *he is alive.* He dared to announce it to me, and as the life force in him grows, he becomes stronger and more insolent. His coming is more dangerously achieved, with more insensate violence. I cannot know what happens during his revivals, I know only that they are very brief. Nor do I know how inclusive is his awareness of the outer world.

The creature has one advantage over me, his master parasite. An animal charged with lust, with beast emotions, activities of which I know nothing since in my world they have for so long been discarded and condemned, he still retains the slight original mental processes which his forebears took with them into exile here when they were driven out—not from their mystical Eden but by our own leader from his world. With this impure remnant of brain power the half-dead animal is able, perhaps, dimly to observe and to understand my plans and purposes. My problem therefore is how to destroy the remnant of his life without breaking past repair the tool necessary to my accomplishment.

Since we have no written language—long discarded as superfluous—I have used the antique hieroglyphic of this tongue for my record until on my return it can be translated into waves of intercommunication. I cannot know how much, if at all, he has been able to read and to understand. I am certain, of course, that it can be only at such times when my own consciousness has been momentarily obliterated by the spasms of his mortal struggle to survive. What other influences, besides the touch and nearness of Sophie, might presently provoke these periods of awareness, how long they

last and how rapidly they increase in frequency and duration, and—more vital—what use he may be able to make of them . . . these questions I should soon be able to answer. My own surrender is, of course, unthinkable.

Let me try to understand him. It is his emotion, the strong, romantic yearning for the ideal woman, his will to reach her and to make her his possession, that has preserved the spark of individual life—this with her physical nearness, her touch, the look in her eyes. I can well believe in their power. In my world there are no children and there is no such expression in the eyes of our mercifully sexless women. The child Ned who follows me about and puts his hand in mine, this woman Sophie—Yes, there is something here of unearthly, brainless innocence, indescribable, incomprehensible. When Sophie lifts that look to me, when her hand touches me so lightly, when her hair brushes my cheek or is silk under my hand, then the tremor takes my body and I lose myself. Even it has come to this, as the life force in him grows, that Ned's fingers trying to warm mine, even the groping, feeble touch of the sick man at the Cottage willing me to be his son—all these are the channels of his surviving strength. Emotion, love, not divine but human. Not the love that passed their understanding and that we refused in favor of our chosen sort of immortality, but the cat's love for her kittens, the female beast's scream of ecstatic surrender, the male beast's cruel spring, the quagmire of human pity. If I could feel any of this, if I could even pretend to feel, I would have a readier weapon. May I not use him, then, for what he is—a beast? So that these sublimations which give him such a glorious vision of himself lose their power, so that they are drowned in self-horror and shame? If I can evoke his loathing for his own existence, his hatred of consciousness, of

continuing life—*his sense of sin.* I had forgotten that obsession, that appalling guilt-sense, self-inflicted, suicidal, the strong memory, surviving in exile, of discovered lust and ruthless punishment, their myth of the angel with the flaming sword. . . . My tool! He will be broken to my uses. He will be driven back to his cell beneath my consciousness, condemned to psychic death. For I can leave his body at will, dropping it to instant death and to decay, but for him there is no possible escape, unless, as he may fantastically conceive, he can drive *me* out before the chosen moment for departure . . . me . . . the Messenger!

If I could pity I believe I might learn to pity even him . . . Adama . . . damned.

For Sophie, there followed a long white night in which, by means of an unlucky gift for self-assurance, she dismissed the terror: that sudden cold movement of fingers, she decided, meant nothing but a shock to her nerves, and Ree's choked cry of "Run!" was to spare her the fashion of that change. But ecstasy was permitted to remain, and the night hours passed in long, woven contemplations of her love. It seemed to her to have opened like a motion-picture flower. How many minutes had her heart needed to unfold itself? How many times had she met with her lover? A first vague sense of his need, an instant's revelation by moonlight in the summer house, a silent, gay approach down the pine slope so swiftly interrupted, a murmured intimacy at her window with his strong warm hand on hers, and—today . . . the kiss. An hour, perhaps, not so much? for the growth of such a love as theirs?

It must mean human happiness for all its uncanny circumstance. He would escape from that strange possessive influence that had seized upon his helpless

body in the jungle, pouring cold fluid into the fevered veins. Thank God that she was free and able to confront it. What did the creature know of the power of human love? This proud investigator to whom all living beings were just tools for his manipulation. And she wondered at her ability to see the two apart—the man of feeling and the man of calculation, each in the same body but with a spirit of his own. No one else could share that magic, surely. It was her vision, her mission, only hers.

When day came, however, with its ruthless rediscovery of material circumstance, there were moments when her brain reeled under its burden. She would watch Duncan Elder at her father's bedside reading aloud a passage to that half-helpless listener, and she would think, "I'm crazy. I'm asleep . . . or awake, dreaming." She spoke to Dr. Sempel to try out his reactions to that sickroom visitor. "It's wonderful," she said, going with the little man to her door, "what Duncan Elder is able to do for Fa, isn't it?"

Dr. Sempel raised his grizzled eyebrows, as bushy as though they were meant to compensate for the baldness above them, and looking aside, agreed with surprising lack of conviction. He did not tell her of Duncan's reply to his own words of appreciation for that devoted attendance. "I find it interesting," Duncan had said, "to watch the struggle of a decaying body against death. I have never before been privileged to observe so closely this phenomenon."

There were other times when she could bear that presence in her house no longer and ran to the refuge of her woods. And here one day after an hour's truantry she came near to the summerhouse and—stopped.

Someone there above her, not visible through intervening branches, was speaking in a low, even voice

with pauses as though to a listener; there were no audible replies.

She took cover, and moving like the shadow of a deer came roundaboutly close enough to see through carefully parted boughs the interior of her playhouse. There sat Duncan on the bench, elbows on knees. He had left her father alone! The sun flecked his dark head and the hands held out before him. His voice was low but very clear, the words reached her.

"These hands," he said, "are mine."

And stopped.

"I can do with them what I will."

Another pause.

"They are my tools."

There was after this statement a longer silence.

"With them," he continued, "I can find what I seek and perform my mission."

She waited, feeling a slow sickness rising in her throat. "With these hands I can destroy. I can, with these hands . . . I can kill."

She waited again, a mist passing before her eyes. His voice rose to a harsh iron vibration. "With *your* body . . . I can torture. . . . With *your* hands . . . I can kill."

She swept away the cold mist. He flexed the long, beautiful fingers, let the hands fall, and rose, and as he came out from the door and moved away, Sophie on her knees, her hand against her throat, forced out with all her courage one tremulous cry of "Ree!"

Elder did not stop but his fashion of walking changed, slowing to uncertainty, and he groped with one hand toward a tree, grasping it as a blind man might or a man in sudden pain. While she stared and felt her mouth go dry, he bent forward, made a retching sound, went down on his knees, clasped his hands across his head, threw back the head, and with a final

dread rattle of his throat, collapsed at length upon the ground.

She thought that he was dead, that with her cry she had killed him, but before she could get herself to her feet, he was there facing her, he had come up like a sapling suddenly released from a weight, and now strode vigorously toward her calling her name, not with fear-filled weakness but in resonant, gay greeting, "Sophie . . . ah, there you are!"

She ran, clung to him, spoke through her teeth. "I won't let you go. I won't. This time you shan't be able to go back. He won't be able to take you from me. You must fight him. You must fight him."

His arms were like a tender armor about her body and he bent his cheek to her hair, drew a deep breath, and startled her by a question in a tone she had never heard from him before, thoughtful, pondering, purposeful, a man's voice. "Tell me, please, Sophie, who is . . . *he?*"

"You don't know?"

He laughed with acidity. "Who am I to fight him? I'm here. I'm gone. Into limbo. My time is patchwork. Just now—or whenever—I was in a room suddenly . . . you weren't there . . . but I thought you had just gone out. There was a book before me there . . . open . . . on a desk. Filled with writing. A pen, and Sophie . . . I could write."

"You wrote in a book of . . . his . . . in a room up there in his house?"

"*My* house—don't forget it. Yes. I wrote. Three words . . . to tell him something that perhaps he doesn't know . . . *I AM ALIVE.*"

She slipped down to her knees, holding him fast, her head pressing his body. "So now he *knows*. He doesn't just have to guess, he *knows*."

"Tell me quickly, Sophie—our time is running out —*who is he?*"

She choked over an unwilling laugh. "He's you. . . . He's you. He's Duncan Elder."

"No. I'm Duncan Elder. He's a liar. You've been fooled."

"He has your face . . . only like stone . . . your eyes . . . but they're like gray ice. Your voice . . . gone dead. . . ."

"Stand up, Sophie, come into the arbor here. Let's sit down. Perhaps we'll have time for you to tell me about him. He's not . . . me, you know. This is Duncan Elder, by God . . . beside you here. There's no other 'me.'"

"He's sort of . . . terrible . . . and wise. It's as if some bloodless part of you had got hold of your body and your speech and even perhaps your mind. I can't describe it. He knows so much . . . he's what you'd call learned."

"Then he's not me, for sure." And he dared that astonishing laughter, which made her catch her breath for the courage of it.

"But . . . here . . . in Little Sandy . . . and at Elderberry . . . he is Duncan Elder."

"That's my name, Sophie." He moved his hands strangely, taking them from her, looking down at them. "I've got to—wipe him out." She caught at his fingers, shuddering.

"Don't . . . don't! Please, if you can, tell me what . . . brings you back . . . to me."

"Your voice . . . your touch . . . someone thinking about you . . . hard."

"If I keep hold of you—like this—can you stay?"

He said nothing for more time than she could spare, so that she shook his arm, then very slowly he told her, "No. You must not do that."

It was Duncan's own admonition when he had thrust her from, but with what a difference. This sternness was for her safety, not for his.

"That's like something he said once. . . . Oh, Ree darling, don't be even a very little like him. Don't be him at all."

"No chance of that. This is *me* only here—with you."

But even as he spoke he drew away from her and rose to his feet, stood looking out at the sunset-branded trees. "Now," in a hard tone, "you've got to let go. I feel . . . I feel—"

She threw herself upon him, but he deliberately, with strength, freed himself and moved rapidly up the slope—not looking back, a strong, light figure, Indian-swift and Indian-silent—toward Elderberry, a resolute Duncan she had not known before who was suddenly not a boy, asleep or dreaming, not a Ree, but a man awake.

But now out of her sight, up there under the trees, her hieroglyphic trees making their runes against the sunset sky . . . what was he? He had felt the coming change and literally torn his body from her. She thought of the nightmare fate ahead of him, and watching him go so bravely toward obliteration and she could not guess what agony of fear, felt her eyes ache with tears, as cold as the master hands that had flexed in anticipation of their power for torture or for death.

When she reached home Hattie May fell upon her. "You left your Fa clean alone by himself, and that ain't a mite like you, chile. You never done anything like that before—But, Lord, you look as white as a cotton boll, and you're shakin' all over. You got to quit wanderin' around them woods. No tellin' what can happen to you there."

"You're so right," the shaken girl gasped, laughing. "Most anything can happen there."

Hattie stayed past her usual time to give Fa his supper and his sleeping pill, and she made Sophie drink hot milk and put her into bed with a hot pad, sitting beside her until the ague left her, weak and half asleep.

Alone, she prayed to a dear Christ, "Lay your hands that cast out devils upon this tortured body that I love and set its spirit free, Christ, Son of God, and of man, who died for love of us . . . Amen." Then she lay still and almost slept. But a voice spoke to her mockingly, "He saved others; Himself he cannot save," and again she woke as love so often wakes—to weeping.

Chapter 11

Duncan had the habit of climbing up to the roof of Elderberry on a clear night to watch the stars. A ladder took him from the attic. He would spend hours, a strong telescope at his eyes, following the passage of the constellations, north and south, about the appointed centers of their mysterious rotation. He would stand, or he would lie on his back, gazing until he seemed to be held from a titanic plunge into space only by that earth suction which grasped the human particles alive or dead while they circled with all the other dusty or fiery or liquid particles in the incredible procession. It rested his brain and his eyes from the long hours of microscopic research, the tense care and observation of his specimens, the careful writing of his record. He was certain that during the last weeks there had been no intrusion or disfiguring scrawls on those thin sheets.

To the roof on one of these clear nights—for misty days had ended in clarity—the sounds of night and dawn came vaguely to his ears, which were delicately tuned to the rustling of the stars. But on more than one occasion a close human tumult had turned his lens down across the tree tops to a field beyond his own property where stood a lighted shack, shaken by raucous cries and throbbing music. He would watch the arrivals, an antlike mass piled on a few ramshackle vehicles or coming quickly afoot from his own woods lane—like fireflies, lit by flash or lantern in small, noisy groups. Their voices rose to him, their laughter and screams of greeting, until the building had received them, when the music began its cacophony and the stamping of feet and loud singing shook the air.

They are not, Duncan told his clear and starlit mind, *an inchworm's step away from the jungle. Listen to them,* he cried to the heavens, *they yowl, they scream, they beat the earth, they roll in jungle lust: the cat, the hyena-women, the ape-and-leopard men. And yet these and their kind can prate to one another of immortal life! They will enter Paradise lusting, shouting, contorting themselves in each other's arms. A strange spectacle truly for the star-crowned spirits.*

Sometimes on still nights he thought he could recognize Bonnie's shrill, childish voice calling out her "Hi" of greeting or her "Be seein' you" of farewell, her laughter shriller than the rest. Then he would remember how she had crept naked and whimpering into the shelter of the brush down there beside his stream; remembering her calmly, accepting her predicament as appropriate; and remembering too that the flesh of his "host" had responded automatically, with no other revival, to the pressure of her lips and of her breast—his host, that borrowed body of a creature whom he, the master, had fancied to be dead to any

experience outside of his command. It was a memory he found extraordinary, the creature being truly in his power. And analyzing the fact, as he dissected every incident, he understood that there was this difference in his prisoner's response—that a purely physical contact, a violent assault upon the flesh of the captured body, brought no response beyond that one of animal lust. It was not the light touch of Sophie's hand, it was not the yearning sweetness of her eyes, no, nor the light, silken brushing of her hair against his cheek that brought this purely animal reaction. The other change, the dangerous transformation, the brief spasm of return to full human consciousness, depended, it would seem, upon the more inclusive or delicate approach. Ah, that curious sublimation "They" had achieved from lust to love, from brutal assault to physico-emotional tenderness. Strange struggle, pitiful and vain . . . how lost . . . how hopeless . . . how . . . damned! But it might be through this very channel, this very sublimation, that he could achieve the absolute extinction of the prisoner's independent life.

Human misery and shame had no more appeal to his star-smitten soul, his mind dedicated to precision and exactitude of line and energy, of theory and space, than would any other set of facts or circumstance: a broken branch, a torn root, a displacement of particles —that was all it could be. When Duncan slept, he never dreamed, having no need of dreams.

On an afternoon toward the end of that last summer month, Duncan was returning from a long expedition on foot across country to an outlying field from which he had taken a specimen of soil. This problem of soil had become of late one of his major preoccupations. It was vital to his mission. He must transplant the small root which an incomprehensible disease had

attacked in its distant habitat. The continued existence of his fellows was dependent upon the fruit of a tree that for long centuries had fed their veins. Now, here and only here, where conditions were known to be sufficiently similar, he had found the encouraging specimens, but of a growth so small, so frail, so sparse, that the difficulty of transportation and of development in a remote area seemed, even to his trained and scientific mind, almost insurmountable. His knowledge of chemistry was vast, his analysis of favorable and unfavorable soils infallible, and upon these skills would depend the ultimate salvation of his people's way of life.

It was late when he came out through his own woods above the lane considered by Little Sandy's citizens to constitute, by its long and undisturbed use, a right-of-way. The tree-crowned bank at this point was high and heavily screened by a growth of wild honeysuckle vines. He was about to move to a more favorable spot of descent when voices from the lane checked him. He was always interested in observation. An instant later Bonnie and a young man came into view.

Bonnie was swinging her brief petticoats and her soft hair in a fashion half insolent, half flirtatious, and wholly provocative. Her hands were pocketed in her short jacket. The youth was tall and thin with a wry, naughty face, and a mouth given to rather meaningless grimaces. He seemed never to be silent. When not speaking in a series of gulps and croaks, he whistled, hummed, or snapped the fingers of his one free hand. The other bore a gunny sack of pine cones surmounted by a mass of holly, to be used probably for the decoration of some gang festivity. Both of these acquisitions had been Duncan's property, but that gave him no pain. He took slight interest in these possessions.

They were walking so slowly, with so many pauses,

that Duncan was able to observe and to hear the above details thoroughly. The name of Sophie sharpened his attention.

". . . Sophie!" the young man spat out contemptuously, though it was difficult to place the object of his scorn. "Fat chance you'd have to catch her at any of our parties. You know damn well, sweetie pie, she wouldn't stoop—lower herself, let's put it—to associate with us cats at the Dump."

"Sophie's no square. She's not a bit stuck-up. She'd go anywhere she felt like going or thought she ought to go."

"Catch her thinkin' she'd want to be seen at the Dump, or *ought* to show up there."

"What you bet, Sempie?" For this odd gangler was Dr. Sempel's grandson, in whom at this stage of his development the old physician took no pride. Sempel had recently been expelled from a business college, and existed at present in a resentful limbo in which Bonnie was his chosen companion—Bulkie permitting.

"O.K. I'll bet you a five-pound box of candy from your pa's counter—double profit for the Hickses—that you can't produce Sophie and hold her with us at the Dump for as long as fifteen minutes at our next meeting."

"I'll take you. Next meeting? That's three days from now, isn't it?"

"Sure thing. The night of September second. I'm going to write that down, with all the conditions. . . ." He laid aside his burden and got out a notebook from his hip pocket. "But gee, Bonnie, she won't dare to come through this lane alone at night."

"Sophie? She's not a mite scared of anything, anyone, or any place. She's not like me. Gives me the shivers goin' through these woods, day or night either. I get so I jump out of my skin hearin' a squirrel give tongue.

No, sir, you won't find me comin' to the Dump by myself any hour of the day or night. Nor goin' away from it, either." She gave her companian, who was still writing, an impatient look. "Come on, Semp, don't write a novel about it. You won't have space for anything else in that everlastin' notebook."

"How you reckon you goin' to bring it off, Bon? Mind me askin'?"

"Oh, I'll send her a message, needin' her for somethin' or other urgent to come to me there."

"Reckon that'll fetch her? You'd have to give a right smart reason."

"Sure enough."

"Think again. The old prof wouldn't let her out—not in the dark."

"He's stuck to his bed, wouldn't know a first thing about it, and she wouldn't tell him. Anyway, it's none of your business. You've made your bet, and just you let me work out for myself how I mean to win it. Whitman's best, Semp—and don't shirk it."

He laughed, returned the notebook to his pocket, resumed his load, and they went out of Duncan's hearing.

When it was time for the lane to be empty from end to end, Duncan found his easier descent and returned to his house. The interview he had witnessed, the idle wager he had heard, meant nothing to him, and he did not consciously remember it. His exquisitely precise memory registered automatically the unimportant details of the bet. But there was one small item that returned to him late while he was writing the record of his day's accomplishment. It came suddenly, with an entirely unrelated vividness, so that he all but wrote it down: "The night of September second." He sat there for some time wondering what reason his expert brain might have had to permit its

intrusion, At last he shrugged and went on with his entry. The phrase did not recur.

The man who walked in the Elderberry woods at night and watched the stars until dawn was both possessor and possessed. There was no fear in him, he had no capacity either for fear or hate. But he was possessed by a purpose, and the trained, dominant will followed a chosen trail more relentlessly than any selected by human love or hate or desperation. During these last days of August he was more than usually faithful in his visits to the Cottage, coming earlier and staying later, so that Sophie was often obliged to carry him a tray for lunch or supper to eat beside Fa's bed. She would not join them, although Fa's eyes besought her. There was always an excuse of kitchen work or some earlier snack. Her throat tightened at the thought of eating in that presence. As often as possible she kept out-of-doors in the kitchen garden or on the back porch, her ear quick to the sound of men's voices, every nerve edged to a change in tone or tempo.

And here to her post of sentinel one evening the visitor came on his moccasined feet to stand above her, startling her almost to faintness. So close he stood behind and above her where she sat on the step that she found it difficult to rise.

"You are expecting someone?" he asked smoothly.

"No. I'm stringing beans. I have to go in now. Something's on the stove."

He lowered himself to sit beside her. "There's nothing on the stove in any danger of boiling over. You wish to avoid me this evening. Why is that?"

She put down her bowl on the ground below the step and rose. "I don't want to take you away from Fa . . . or . . . or to interrupt your talk."

"That is not the case. You are afraid of me."

She was on her feet not quite in front of him, the angry blood hot in her face. "What do you know about fear? I thought it was one of those contemptible sensations you and your brother-devotees had got rid of."

He dismissed this with a movement of the hand. "And you hate me."

A queer choking sound in her constricted throat was disregarded as he went on serenely, "Or is it, perhaps, that in spite of everything you find so fearful and so hateful, you desire me?"

"Let me go in," she whispered.

"You desire me. If I can understand the animal instincts of a woman's nature, you desire me in a fashion and with an intensity that would make you welcome violence at my hands. You—what is the word in use?—you *love* these hands of mine. . . ." He held them out and up toward her—the beautiful hands she would hold against her lips, her breast—and she struck them away, sobbing, as he rose before her, towering on the step. Her mind struggled. "Shall I put my hands in his? Shall I touch him?" She heard Ree's voice, as though commanding, "No. *You must not* do that."

The man was staring down into her eyes, but they turned from him at a sudden sound, and in a sharpened voice he said, "Who's that, like a watchman in the lane?"

Her heart leaped and she moved swiftly toward that watchman, who vaulted the hedge and put his arms about her.

"Blaise! You're back."

"I told you—I had to close things up." He bent his mouth close. "What goes on here?"

Speaking faster than usual, Duncan answered as though he had heard the whispered speech, and he came to stand beside them. "He is your guardian,

Sophie," said the tall man vaguely visible in the dusk, but she caught the deep change in his tone as he looked urgently from one to the other, as though he were in haste to be gone, and as she turned from Blaise to face him, he took her hand in his. The grasp was burning hot. He moved even closer to the young man and placed that hand of hers upon his arm. "You . . . love each other. You act in the fashion of that feeling. Believe me, Blaise LeClerc, you are right to guard her. You are right, Sophie, to . . . take him for a guardian." His voice fell to so low a key that they barely heard the words which trembled, "Don't fail her. In God's name . . . she may need you. Horrible things may happen. Things that will seem to you most horrible in these your lives. . . ." And he left them, going swiftly past them and around the corner of the house, not looking back to see the effect of his announcement, which had the sound of oracle. They heard the gate click and a sound of quieter steps—then silence.

Sophie clung to Blaise's arm like a scared child, her head bent to her clinging hands, sobbing uncontrollably.

"What did he mean?" Blaise's lips moved hungrily across her hair. "Darling, darling, I'm here. You're safe."

She whispered, not answering, "What did he mean? He said that horrible things may happen to us in these our lives. What could he mean? He spoke as if he knew something. Now I *am* afraid. Not just of him. I've a strange feeling . . . a sort of world-fear . . . as if new, awful things had come too close to us, things we aren't prepared to understand. No, you can't . . . no more than I can, but perhaps you feel it too. . . . Your hands" —she ran her fingers down to feel them—"oh, Blaise dear, your hands are cold."

They drew close together in the growing dark, a first star shivering above them, needing each other, standing alone in a universe larger, more incomprehensible to the children of men, than is the man himself to the ant that climbs up and down across his instep.

Chapter 12

On that day long after dark, alone in his laboratory, Duncan Elder wrote:

A second experiment has failed, because of the arrival of her lover. There was, besides, that indescribable gap in my consciousness. I found myself face down upon the ground along the trail homeward. No recollection of leaving S. and LeClerc. The intrusions and departures increase in violence and in danger with every increase in his ability to emerge. This brings me inevitably to my third project. Chance of failure may be great, but if successful, a final and triumphant solution.

Here are the difficulties involved:

1. That the provocation of the *animal alone,* as in the incident with the Hicks girl in my woods by the brook, should not involve the return to full human consciousness.

2. That the aftermath may not take place—i.e., that terrible awareness, that overwhelming deadly conviction of crime against a beloved object, resulting in his psychic death.

3. The conviction may not annihilate the remnant of independent life or may even involve total death, a final shattering of my tool. The taking possession of a dying body at the precise instant being the most difficult part of the original procedure. I am depending largely upon the up-to-now brevity of these returns, a lightning flash, a realization instantaneous and shattering. This one, however, may be so prolonged as to destroy utterly the body on which my mission must depend. There can never be another chance if I fail. The almost-certain discovery of the life-plant in this area forbids my change of venue. The convenience of Duncan Elder's situation here in Little Sandy is another final inducement. I must, in fact, gamble my own achievement, my own triumph or disastrous return, upon one throw. I have made the choice. If it fails only because of incomplete accomplishment, I must furnish myself with a scapegoat and take some other course. It will, at least, rid me permanently of the interference of S. G. and remove the motive of my prisoner's desire for life, his one channel of enslaved emotion.

My mind is made up. I cannot conceive of failure. The date is set.

He closed the book and returned it to the self-locking drawer, the pen to his pocket. He then rose and went over to inspect his plants, standing with his hands linked loosely behind his long straight back, entirely calm and at his ease, free from any tinge of fear or of compunction, a scientist at his congenial tasks—experimentation, the manipulation of material for exact and

necessary ends. The thought of what was to come not many nights ahead was far less disturbing to him than would have been a failure in the growth and well-being of those tender little plants.

A hundred weak strands, woven as if by some creative mind, make up the rope that hangs a man or insures a prisoner's escape. Such unimportant-seeming threads precede even the great catastrophes or the rapturous climaxes of life.

So—early in the evening of September the second of that year in the town of Little Sandy, Bulkie rattled up to the Hickses' gate and went to the door, summoning Bonnie. She came to his ring in no very gracious mood. "You're early."

"Sure thing. I know. I thought we could take a run. It's a nice day."

"Not near so nice as yesterday. Weatherman says rain for tonight. That good spell's not to last long, for sure."

"It's not raining now, sissy. What's eatin' you? Are we goin' to a party tonight or to a funeral?"

She made a face. "I'm not dressed for either yet. Sit down somewhere while I get ready. Amuse yourself. Make yourself at home and all that sort of thing. T.V.?"

She went away with listless steps. He heard her walking to and fro in her room above him and sat gloomily sprawled in an armchair, forced presently to listen to Mrs. Hicks's anxious prattle. She was always in a state about something, he thought, Ned or Bonnie or "my Edward" or a sick sister. Bulkie was bored and made no special secret of it, but the little woman was so used to indifferent audiences and so blinded by her admiration for Wilkins and her recent desire to have him for a son-in-law that she chattered on monotonously

in Bonnie's childish key, ignoring the continuous accompaniment of commercials and the thunder of gunshots and horses' hooves.

When Bonnie came down in her full-skirted frock, a flower in her hair and her face bright with rouge, Bulkie rose quickly and Mrs. Hicks watched them off: her daughter so pretty and slight, the young man so big and heavily handsome. "A fine chunk of a man, like a real good watchdog," she thought, smiling and waving. "Have a good time. Not too late, honey! Take care of her, Wilkie dear."

"Where you goin' carry me, Bulkie? I don't think it's such a good evenin' for sittin' out anywhere."

"It's always a good evenin' for that, honeybun, but that's not the plan: I aim to run us over to Big Sandy and treat us to a good sizzlin' steak with the fixin's at the English Grill."

"Thanks. I've had my supper."

He looked down at her. "You're right ornery, aren't you? O.K., you can sit and watch me eat. I haven't had *my* supper."

They drove on silently for a few miles. The country was sad, its long, pine-clad horizons as dark as a winter sea. A streak of red bled in the west. Bonnie said, "I ought've brought a warmer coat. It's goin' to be right chilly later on—and so am I for sure before mornin'. Take me back, Bulkie. I'm not goin' to Big Sandy with you. Don't feel like it. I reckon the Dump party will be about all I can take tonight. I'm just not in the mood."

"So what? I'm in the mood, and it's me who's takin' you." Suddenly he was flushed with anger and turned his big scowl upon her. "You either come along with me and like it or you get out, Miss Hicks, and walk home. I know what's eatin' you. It's that dark-complected boyfriend of yours, *Mr. LeClerc.* He's back

and he hasn't been lookin' you up, uh? How about it?"

"Oh, for Chrissake, let me out. I'd rather walk five miles alone than drive one with you when you're in this mood." The car stopped. She was out, startling him by her unexpected suddenness, and not even looking after her, he sent his car snarling over the low rise ahead and out of her sight.

Unlike many southern girls Bonnie was a sturdy and accustomed walker. She started out briskly, flouncing her skirts. Her dancing shoes were the flat kind appropriate for the steps of the Gang's gyrations. The sandy soil was kind to their thin soles. She walked fast in a spirit of release, being fed up with Bulkie. She hoped this would be the end of his pursuit. Pursuit? . . . the end of his persecution! Even Mom would take it pretty hard when she knew that he'd set her afoot, and at dusk, too. It'd be dark before she got to town. The party would be in full swing. Darn that Bulkie! Tears pricked and blurred and were winked angrily away. She quickened her steps. Headlights of the few cars that passed swept into the growing darkness. Perhaps she could thumb a ride, but everyone was going the wrong way. Little Sandy to Big was the order of the sparse night traffic.

It was indeed dark by the time she came to the entrance of that right-of-way through the Elderberry woods. She stood for a long minute looking into the dimness ahead and remembering her silly wager with Sempel. She'd probably lose it anyway. Sophie might refuse any bait so late on a night like this one. With those tall trees like upright shadows about her and that iron-dark sky above, she felt that she would far rather forfeit her five-pound box of candy and her gambler's pride, was half in mind to go home now and give up the party altogether. A sound of horse's hooves turned her, and her gloomy world went bright.

Blaise LeClerc was leading a lame horse along the road. She ran to meet him. "Hi, stranger, Hi, Blaise!"

Blaise stopped. "You, Bonnie? So late!"

"Bulkie set me afoot. He was taking me to a Dump party tonight by way of a dinner at the English Grill, the poor sap! and we had a hassle. He threw me out of his car."

"You mean . . . let you walk back in the dark? Let you go alone to the Dump?"

"Oh, Blaise, be a honey and take me through the woods, won't you? Where you goin' with Lucy, anyway?"

"She's gone lame. I was leading her back to the stables. I've been walking for miles. She went lame out in the sticks—miles off—just like Bulkie, set *me* afoot." Blaise had a guilty feeling as he looked down at this little creature standing before him with lifted face and big eyes. "Sure I'll take you," he said quickly, heartiness not quite convincing. "I'll tie Lucy up here. I think it's going to rain."

"Not yet, I reckon. You'll have time to get back to Lucy and home before the storm. I'll sure enough get me a lift home after the party."

They walked a short way in silence, Blaise tossing the light of his flash against the sandy road and the wooded banks. It thrust among the pine trunks like a probing finger. Bonnie's hand was on his arm. "I was right sorry about your mother, Blaise."

"Thanks. This was a sudden attack, but she's been sick a long time. She seems to have made a pretty good comeback. Arizona's the right place."

"You back for a spell?"

"Long enough to wind up this sale."

"Oooh, Blaise. That's dreamy. Danny?"

"Settling out there. Mamma's better and he's liking

the setup. But look here, Bonnie, you're shivering. That little jacket of yours . . ."

"I am sort of cold now that I've stopped walking so fast. But tell me—"

"You take my coat. It's the leather one I wear all the time; it's practically waterproof. I won't be needing it. It's a short way home and I've got my sweater."

She let him slip the red leather coat over her slenderness, laughing to see the sleeves hang down over her hands.

"It's practically an ulster on you." He laughed. "What a whiffet you are!"

"Like Sophie. Whiffet? That's a cute word. I never heard it before. You talk real different, Blaise darlin'. I do love the way you speak. You and Sophie both, though her lingo is somethin' else again. It's like her father's, only toned down and not so finicky. He came from Boston to teach at the Virginia University, she says. I wonder why he lost his job. . . . But Blaise, tell me your plans. What'll you be doin' here? I mean, where you goin' to live—Red Hill sold'n all?"

"I can stay at the gatehouse. Mr. Baird lets me keep Lucy at the stables. He doesn't keep horses of his own."

"Have you seen Sophie?"

"Sure."

There was a silence. Then, in a subdued tone, Bonnie spoke. "You don't have to take me right up to the door, Blaise. I've got to run in to Old Diggs's for a moment first to telephone. I forgot something." Here the clamor of the Dump reached their ears and the lights from the uncurtained windows streamed across them. Blaise stopped. "If you don't mind I'll go on back to Lucy. She's apt to pull back on her reins. O.K.?"

"But Blaise, I'll be seein' you, won't I?" She clung to

him. He put his arms around her and she lifted her face for him to kiss.

It was not the kiss she craved. She knew that she had lost him.

She said not another word, drew away, and walked forward swinging her skirts, her hands, with the sleeves pushed back, dug into the pockets of the red leather coat. She held her head up, stopped where the path split toward Diggs's farmhouse a few yards ahead, and saluted Blaise with a quick military precision. He turned and walked off. His throat felt tight. He did not see her go into the farmhouse. After he had turned she hesitated for a long minute, watching his figure lose itself in the darkness of the lane and his thin pencil light wavering amongst the trees. Then she went in to fulfill the terms of her wager by means of Old Diggs's telephone.

At the other end of that wire, Sophie was glad to hear the ringing. Her evening had been an uneasy one. Duncan Elder had come very late to visit her father. Supper was over, the lights were lit, when she found him at her door. His strangeness as he stood there against the background of night smote her afresh. Her instinct was to shut this creature out into the darkness.

He seemed entirely unconcerned. "I hope I'm not unwelcome," he said in the assured tone that contradicts such an assumption. "I have here a treasure, just found, that the professor and I have been searching for almost since his first visit to Elderberry. It's a volume of travels, long out of print, with some quaint illustrations, the record of a visit to Italy made by a young, titled Englishman on his grand tour. I may come in and show it to your father? He can't be asleep yet."

"N-no. He hasn't had his sedative. But please don't keep him too late or excite him too much."

"I am no physician and have had no experience with illness, but Dr. Sempel has told me that any experience of pleasure or of interest would be for your father the best medicine of all." And indeed Dr. Graeme, propped up in bed with his bright eyes the only tool of his emotion, was so obviously demonstrating the value of that prescription as the clock ticked on, that Sophie, wandering restlessly about or trying to hold herself chairbound by a book, could not bring herself to urge Duncan's departure, the while her discomfort increased until her fingertips were cold. And the formal, measured voice went on and on, torturing her nerves.

It was therefore a relief when the phone rang in the hall. She thought it might in some way help to break into the obsessive intensity of the bedroom session, or—and this was even more desirable—it might be Blaise. But at once, "Hullo," she said. "This you, Bonnie?"

"No, honey, this is Bonnie's mom."

Sophie was startled. She had been sure it was Bonnie.

"Your voices are so alike."

"That's what everyone says. I just hate to plague you, Sophie, but I'm in a state, a regular tizzy." The caller's voice sounded as though she had been crying, the words were so muffled. "My Neddy's been taken down sudden, awful sick. Oh yes, he surely is. I've sent for Doc, but I'm all alone here, my Edward off on a business trip and Lorraine can't come and I do want my Bonnie. She's at that Dump—a good name for it!—and there's no phone there. So I was just wonderin' if you'd be so kind, since it's so close to your house'n all. . . ."

"Of course. I can run through the woods, won't take me two minutes. It's not raining now—in fact, the stars are out. Anyway, I know that lane as well as the path

to our gate. I want to know, please, what the doctor says. I'll get Bonnie, don't worry. I'm glad you called. Good night."

She came to the bedroom door, and Duncan, rising, followed her into the sitting room.

"Duncan, I can't leave Fa alone. Being with you he won't even know I've gone, so will you stay with him for perhaps a quarter of an hour? I have to go out—on an errand. Ned Hicks is sick, his mother wants me to get Bonnie. It won't take any time—it's just through the woods to that shack they call the Dump."

"Assuredly," said Duncan, "but—"

She said quickly, thinking that he would suggest going in her place, and the idea of his appearance at the Dump for Bonnie presenting an impossible conjunction of events, "No. It's better this way. Fa would want an explanation and it would just spoil his evening. If you will. . . ?"

"Of course. It is a pleasure."

And more than that to me, thought Sophie, *to get away from this little low house . . . and you . . . into the big night, so wide, so friendly.*

"Is it raining, dark?" Duncan asked. "Your flash?"

"I've lost it. Won't need it anyway." And catching up a coat beside the door, she slid past him and he closed her softly out.

Sophie had been wrong about the stars. As soon as the door closed she found herself in shocking darkness. It was like being dropped to the fathomless bottom of the sea. She turned to borrow Duncan's flash but the thought of facing him again drove her away, finding a dim increase of eyesight as she began to distinguish the path, the gate, the pallor of the lane. As she entered the right-of-way the tall tree trunks were faintly visible. An uncanny sensitivity affected all her nerves. She dared not touch the trunks or branches for fear of

changing them. She was the only thing that moved—not even a fallen pine cone knocked the stillness, the needles were mute, no animal scuttered across the ground, no bird dreamed musically. But she did hear inexplicable sounds, unreal voices, sleuth steps, unlikely movement. She was not Sophie—she was *Prey*.

The blessing of her trees had vanished.

Why had she left Fa with that one? Why had that one let her go out into the dark? There was something wrong with the world tonight. She had lost reality. She tried to think herself back into the right dimension, searching without hope for familiarity: faces good to see, music, the homely barking of some faithful dog, bold footsteps upon paving stones, a boy whistling, a little girl singing to herself . . . and Ree . . . where was he in the woods tonight? She wanted to call him, but there was a tight band around her throat and that masterful presence she had just left seemed to be beside her, over her. There was an instant during those terrible spasms of the Change when the two-fold being seemed to be neither Ree nor the man who called himself Elder, but a mindless, unguided, and ferocious force. . . .

When the raw light from the shack glared at her she struck her hands together and laughed aloud. Light—reasonable human light! As she ran toward it she remembered horribly that she would have to go back. "I'll shut my eyes and put my hands over my ears—it's a short distance. I know every step of the way. I'm beginning to see. I can borrow a light. Perhaps Bonnie will come with me—yes, of course she will. . . ."

Was that a following step?

Oh no. . . . no . . . no. . . .

Chapter 13

Duncan Elder, as soon as he had shut Sophie out into the night, returned to the bedside. "I've been told," he said, as if obeying instructions, "to give you your sleeping pills. Dr. Sophie's orders. This is it? No, sir, I must not postpone it, much as I'd like to. I am under orders, you see. Here it is . . . and the water. That's right. You're comfortable. . . . Here, I'll take away the pillow. Good night, sir. Pleasant dreams. Tomorrow we can return to the book. I'll leave it here on your bed table. I'll be back early. I'll turn out your light and sit out here for a few minutes, if I may, with Sophie."

In the living room he drew on his coat, put on his gloves, and after a careful wait of five minutes or so to give Sophie time to come close to her destination, he went quietly away from the house. Dr. Graeme had made no sound.

He moved on moccasins past the fence and turned into the lane. It was as familiar to him now as it was to Sophie. He went tranquilly along it, his eyes well trained to gather whatever light the darkness offered, keeping close to the bank and treading always upon needled ground. When the lights of the shack fell across his path he stepped back into the shelter of the trees and became as motionless as they. The sound of voices and of music reached him and suddenly grew loud as the door of the Dump was opened. There followed a confused sound of voices, the door closed, and the slender figure came quickly toward him through the dimness of the lane. The watcher among the trees could see, against the lighted windows behind her, that silhouette of Sophie's girlhood—the full skirt, the straight carriage, the swinging hair, the young, forward-going steps.

She slowed as she came into the woods and loitered, looking back, and as she did so, he took out of his pocket a scarf and suddenly sprang down from the bank. The silk kerchief fell across her face from behind, gagging and blinding her, and she was lifted, pressed close against his hard body, and carried, helplessly writhing, out of the road and, in two or three great strides, into the darkness of the woods.

In a matter of moments the rustle of bushes and the sound of rolling stones ceased, and the Elderberry night was still.

Duncan moved out of the small open space among the bushes that he had selected for his third experiment, left the human tool whose usefulness was ended, and removed the gloves that he used for the uprooting of tiny plants. There was a thoughtful, expectant look on his face. Everything now waited upon the next phase. If that did not appear, he had made a false

move and his experiment would have failed. At the best, he would have to contrive a more effective means for his strong purpose, obliterating all evidence of his own involvement; at the worst, his mission might be utterly thwarted and its messenger condemned to a disgraceful flight. He walked slowly, his eyes by now entirely accustomed to the dark, finding a way for his trained body through the trees, walking more and more slowly, watching himself, as a doctor might feel under his careful finger the pulse of a dying man.

But what Duncan felt for one second of triumphant consciousness was a terrible convulsion that half tore his muscles from their bones and flung him down along the ground. There, then, he lay, gasping, mouth open, mucus and sweat and tears pouring from him, raking the wet leaves and clay-dried earth with his long, shaking hands. He writhed until the convulsed body began to lift, to move on hands and knees, dragging itself like a wounded animal to some appointed place of refuge or of sheltered death, the hands torn and bleeding, the trousers ripped and stained with earth and blood. Across the wet, rough ground he moved, stopping now and again in icy sweat to retch and moan and weep—out of the woods, down the slippery bank into the graveled driveway, painfully on and on, so to the steps of Elderberry and the columned porch. There the tortured creature collapsed, stretched out its shuddering length, face down, and lay profoundly still. A recent corpse would have shown more semblance of life than did the strong young body of this murdered man.

The rain began again, falling heavily, but stopped before dawn, and a Carolina sun came up with a bridegroom splendor, so that the hardier rosebuds dreamed again of June and the mourning dove began his too-incessant little dirge. When the warmth

touched Duncan's body on the porch, it moved and rose. Its master looked down and saw his soiled and filthy plight with satisfaction. He removed his moccasins, opened the door quietly, and went into the dim, shuttered house. In the hall, after considerable thought, he returned to the coat in the closet that scarf he had taken from it. Then in that unreal atmosphere of dreams and with the soundlessness of dreams he climbed the stairs. There was no sign of Peter.

Elder went into his room and gently closed the door. There he ripped off his clothes, folded them, and stuffed them into a duffel bag which he often took with him on his more distant botanical expeditions. This he placed in the usual corner of the closet, its contents to be burned or buried at his convenience. He ran himself a deep hot bath, doctored his torn hands, knees, and shins, got himself into clean pajamas, and so, methodically, into his bed, where he lay down with a long breath of accomplishment and was immediately asleep.

Blaise had sprinted back to Lucy. Knowing her impatient and irritable disposition, he was afraid he might find a broken rein. Fortunately, she was only tossing her head and pawing with her sound forefoot.

"Darn you fillies!" said Blaise. "Every last one of you expects to take and keep hold of all there is of at least one man. That's not the way we're made, and don't you forget it!"

Whistling wearily, he went toward the stables. Here the electric current had been cut off, the new owner having no use for it, and Blaise saw to his mare by the light of a smoky, ill-smelling lantern. While he worked with all the patience and gentleness of a horse lover, he was called from the half-open stable door.

"You there, Mr. Blaise?"

Blaise looked up to greet one of the men who had worked for Hildreth and had stayed on with the new owner.

"Oh, Jim, hullo. You're out late."

"I sure am. Mr. Baird up to the big house—you know I'm working for him now—kept me late. Folks visitin', and I had to help Ada in the kitchen. It's on to half past eleven. I saw your light here, and I was figurin'—let me give you a hand. Like old times to work over Lucy, and I sure like hosses better'n housework."

Blaise was glad enough of his help, and together they worked, sometimes exchanging a comfortable word or two, sometimes working in a hard-breathing or soft-whistling silence. At last Blaise said, "You better be getting on home, Jim. It's close to midnight."

"Yes, sir. Ten minutes after by my watch. Good night. She'll do all right now, I reckon."

"Thanks to you."

"O.K., Mr. Blaise?"

"O.K., Jim."

Blaise stood there wearily. It was very late. Sophie would have gone to bed. His thwarted desire for her good-night swelled to unimaginable intensity. *I must see her.* . . . He threw himself into the night and went as far as the edge of the field beyond which her small acreage began. There he paused. His torch showed the glittering streaks of rain and he could hear the sound of their falling. Sophie would be asleep, he should not disturb her. He turned unwillingly and went back to his own dark cottage. Stripping off his sodden clothes, he got into a robe and lit a fire in the small fireplace, shivering more from fatigue than from cold, and sat down before it, holding out his hands to the warmth.

He had plodded across acres of muddy field, lowered and replaced fence poles, climbed in and out of

ditches. He lay down stiffly on the rug. His heart was cold and hungry, but it must wait. Tomorrow he would see her. God, how he wished he had her here now and forever in his arms. Tomorrow . . . tomorrow . . . he was asleep.

Before six o'clock in the evening of the mild day that followed the rain, Big Sam whispered Hattie out to the back porch of the Graeme cottage. Big Sam's face had a gray pallor. "Come out here, Hattie May. Mr. Blaise, he been around here today?"

"No, he ain't."

"Hattie May, I got to tell you somethin'. Best you try to keep it from your Miss Sophie long's you can."

He sat down beside her on the step, his knees as high as his head. The sky was misty blue back of the charcoal blackness of the crooked pine branches. There was no wind. Everything was wet and clean.

"They found the body of the girl," whispered Sam, "out in the Elderberry woods. Some of those young folks that was at the party down to Diggs's place, they has been out searchin' for her, 'cause they knowed she'd stepped out account of some bet or other for fifteen minutes, and she ain't never come back. Hush you, Hattie May, and don't you let Miss Sophie hear any sooner than she has got to. They found his coat—Mr. Blaise's—yes'm, that red leather one he wears about town come cold weather . . . close to her. Yes'm . . . she daid . . . Miss Bonnie Hicks . . . murdered . . . and she . . . raped."

"Lord. Oh, Lord. Oh, my Lord." Hattie rocked her body.

Sam went on. "They all het up about it—the whole town. And them young folks that foller Bonnie about, they're a reg'lar gang like, near about ready to tear that young feller to bits. That's truth. The police been

notified and they're takin' their time out yonder in the woods, measurin' and markin' and investigatin'. They won't arrest nobody for sure till they got their evidence on the spot, but it seems like someone had ought to git to Mr. Blaise and hide him out, for Miss Sophie's sake —she and him, they mighty close friends like, seems— and so he'll have a chance to git judgment in a court of law. Someone's bound to start somethin'. Them young folks and some of them adults too, I reckon, they likely to move fast. They think they got all the evidence they need right now. He might have to make a run for it."

"Hush you, Sam. Hush you, now. I got to think. I got to think fast 'count of Miss Sophie. I reckon he's her best and closest sweetheart, or near to that. . . . How we goin' to keep this from her? Ain't no way to keep it. This is goin' to knock the heart clean out of her body, goin' to make her *old*. Where they goin' to . . . where they taken . . . it?"

"They haven't taken it. They've left it laying' for them police tests. Mrs. Hicks she out of her head, and Mister he near about the same, likely. The whole town is snarlin' like a pack of bloodhounds. I thank my Heavenly Father for that red coat, else us folks down on Black Creek Way'd be in blacker water—and deeper —for sure."

"Hush you, Sam. I'm goin right away now to warn Mr. Blaise. He ain't likely to have done nothin' of that kind. It's someone else, for sure. Police, they'll find out the truth, if white folks give 'em time to investigate."

Here she jumped and turned, rising to her feet. Sophie had come out onto the porch and stood there above them. She was holding herself rigidly and had the look of an apparition. She began to speak like some sort of automaton. "She went out of the shack . . . she was gone just about fifteen minutes . . . they kept me there . . . and then Sempel took me home in some-

one's jeep . . . it was some sort of bet . . . she was the one who had phoned me, not her mother. . . ." She seemed to become aware of her listeners, and her face whitened more deeply and went tight. "Stop talking, you two," she said. "I've heard. The newsboy came. Sam, will you get to the Red Hill gatehouse as fast as you can run and carry a note to Blaise? Go across the fields and through the brush—don't let anyone see you—and come back here to me."

She went into the house, wrote the note, and handed it to Sam. She stood for a moment staring at nothing, then moved toward the telephone. On her way she closed the door of her father's bedroom. He had been complaining that Duncan had not come to read from the travel book.

"Is this you, Peter? May I speak to Mr. Elder, please."

A few minutes later came the usual calm "Hello, who is this?"

"Duncan, are you alone?"

There followed a long, humming silence into which she spoke with urgency. "Duncan—Duncan—are you listening?"

He spoke then, very slowly, in a changed, almost unrecognizable tone. "Sophie?"

"Yes, yes. Have you heard . . . ?"

"Yes. Ah! . . . that the body of—the girl was found in the woods not very far from the Elderberry lane which the young people are in the habit of using to get to and from their meeting place. I was not told who—"

"It was Bonnie. And do you know that some people, some wicked, crazy devils . . . think because *his* coat was found near her, and she had told someone that he had brought her through the woods . . . that . . . that . . ."

". . . that Blaise LeClerc is guilty of the crime?"

There followed another curiously tense-seeming pause, then, "I was sorry to leave your father alone last night," he went on, she hardly listening. "Peter called me. An important long-distance—"

"Duncan, I am going to remind you of something." Now she was speaking slowly and in a voice unlike her own. "You told me . . . Blaise and me . . . one evening not very long ago, that something would happen . . . something horrible . . . something that would seem very horrible to us in these our lives." And to herself, bending her forehead to her hands, she whispered, "He will do what I ask . . . Ree . . . Ree . . . he will do what I ask. Believe me. Trust me."

"I do not remember," Duncan said.

She waited as though to give him a chance for recollection, then went on as clearly and coldly as before. "You said it. And I think you would not want anyone to know that you said it, because this horrible thing *has* happened to us in our lives . . . to Blaise and me . . . and you must understand that I will do anything to help Blaise, anything to *anyone,* no matter how dreadful that might be."

"I do not follow your reasoning," he said, "or understand your recollection. What you say, I surmise, is some sort of threat."

The knuckles of Sophie's hand holding the receiver looked frozen in their tense whiteness. "You can see for yourself how little it takes to stir up deadly suspicion, and these people would not believe in second sight. She . . . she was found in your woods, not very far from your house, and you were not here with Fa when I came back last night. Everyone knows that you walk about those woods at all hours. And people have not forgotten other things. They know that Bonnie was afraid—" She caught her breath (*oh Bonnie . . . Bonnie!*), went on, "She was afraid of you and she had

hinted at some frightening experience in those woods. There has been rumors. If I should be called as a witness'—her breath caught again and the name tortured her mind . . . *Ree, Ree*—"or if I should come forward voluntarily as a witness, I . . . I—" Here her voice broke completely and her soul writhed. She was speaking to the other, but what horror of obliteration had overcome that helpless prisoner—and was she now threatening him with judgment? Her young mind reeled, and pale clouds of mist passed before her eyes. But Bonnie . . . Bonnie . . . and the beautiful, strong hands which were the tools of death. . . .

His voice came tranquilly. "What do you want me to do?"

"The town's gone mad. Those young men of Bonnie's, her gang, are ready to . . . to lynch Blaise. They've always hated him. They call him 'West Indian nigger.' " She forced herself to go on. "They'd have no mercy on him. You don't know . . . it's something in their blood, the result of some horror, some fear. . . . It's a tradition, a curse upon the South . . . from long ago. You wouldn't understand. I don't myself. I'm not . . . one of them."

"What do you want?"

She waited, trying to bring her strength and her mind back to its intention. "Duncan, you *are* listening?"

"What else?"

"If he . . . if Blaise comes to your house . . . tonight . . . soon . . . I dared to tell him that you would take him in, hide him there at Elderberry. It's the last place they'd expect to find him. Duncan . . . Duncan . . . are you still there? For God's sake!"

But he waited for ten of her tight, labored heartbeats.

Then, "I will take him in," he said.

She let fall the receiver and put her face beside it. He could hear her sobbing, and her voice saying over and over, "Ree . . . Ree . . . Ree. . . ." But she could not hear the voice at the other end of the wire saying softly, "You are speaking to Ree, child? He will not be back."

Chapter 14

After a frustrating day during which the new occupant of Red Hill had kept him for an interminable inspection of his new properties with a request for instructions about the use of this or that, Blaise at last reached his lonely cottage. Sam's furtive knock brought him to the door.

He read Sophie's note and looked up at the messenger with a white, incredulous face.

"Bonnie?" he said.

"Yes, sir. In the Elderberry woods close to that road we-all use."

"Not . . . dead?"

"Yes, sir, and—raped."

"God!" He took a hand from his eyes and bent them again to the paper, shaking in his hand. The blood surged back to his face. "They can't! It's not true. Sophie's out of her head!"

"No, sir, she ain't. They're gangin' up on you and they're goin' to move fast. They found that red coat of yours close to the body. You best git out'n here quick as you can."

"Run? Ask *him* to take me in?"

"I best git back, sir. Miss Sophie, she told me—"

Blaise's thin dark hand clenched on his arm. "Hold up, man. I've got a message for her."

He went back from the door into his house, Sam following reluctantly, and wrote a word or two on the paper of her note: "Don't worry. I'll take care of myself. Thanks for the suggestion. I love you. Blaise."

"That's that, Sam, but—just a minute—don't be in such an all-fired hurry. Nobody's after *you.*"

"Can't tell who-all they're after—who they're goin' to be after."

"Will you see to my mare up there in the stables—if I don't get back? She's lame, and I'd like you to take her to the vet. Make a note of how much your time's worth. Will you?"

"Yes, sir." Sam was moving doorwards, looking back. "Best you git out quick, Mr. Blaise. They'll be comin' along here to take care of you mighty soon, I reckon. There's a bunch of them—"

"I won't be here. I'm going to the police."

Sam opened his eyes wide, then muttered, "Police . . . if you can make it. . . . God!" and loped out of the house. Blaise went to the porch and saw him double his length down into the shelter of the brush and vanish. It was beginning to be dark. The evening gathered. It was a mild night and very still. The lights of the small town's Main Street had begun to throw their glow into the sky.

Shock had produced in Blaise's excitable nervous system a tense compulsion. He must act at once. Positively. And not by flight. The thought of Bonnie killed

horribly by some unknown monster was simply not acceptable to his consciousness. It had had the effect of certain gunshot wounds, producing neither pain nor mental reaction. He had just one motivation, to get to the police and to show them . . . himself. For what he was, a man incapable of such an act. They would see for themselves, these men of law, not baying bloodhounds with the faces of men.

That simile startled him. He caught up a flashlight, threw on a dark jacket, not alas, the red leather one, looked vaguely about for an instant, shook his head, and went out, locking the door. That would hold them for a few minutes, perhaps. Then he walked boldly out between the gateposts with their tall white plaster hounds, and so, firmly, rapidly, down the lane that led to Little Sandy.

Red Hill stood at the top of a long slope above the town, the big house almost at the height of its pine-clad crest. At the first turn of the unpaved road that brought him close to the center of the place there was a clear view down Magnolia Road to Main Street. Here Blaise jerked his body to a stop. He saw a group gathered at the foot of this wide, tree-bordered way, its houses shining already with evening lights. He could not distinguish the faces of the men, but he could hear the thick and ugly sound of their consultation, that clogged southern speech at once softer and more sinister than any other in its cruelty. They were, of course, on foot, and they were not all youths. He recognized the figure of Clem Ballard, the garbage collector, and —who was that other?—surely not Jenkyns, the undertaker? And he recognized Bulkie, and, straining at the leash he held, a pair of hounds.

Blaise turned and ran. He was quick and light of foot and found himself past the Red Hill entrance and in a few blurred minutes deep into the woods. Here

was a plantation of pines, beyond it the highway, and beyond that the Elderberry acreage. There was still a failing light, fast darkening. He did not want to use his flash.

When he had reached the shelter of those familiar trees he stopped for breath and to listen. He was too far away to hear voices, and the hounds were silent. They'd take them to his house, break down the door, no formidable barrier, and find his shoes? His shirt? anything he had worn to give the hounds his scent, and they'd be after him. Or had they perhaps shown them his leather coat? For an instant he stood in the blackout of fear. Then, setting his teeth together, he began to move swiftly and steadily through the trees. Here they stood tall above the needled soil, no brush to confuse their pillared dignity, a few seedlings of their own race close to their roots. Blaise made good time, and when he reached the tangle of bushes and the confusion of deciduous trees, the dogwood, nut, sassafras, and oak, he knew that he must be above the little brook. He slid and tore his way down, stepped into the cold water, and waded for fifty yards or more until he came to the little boxed spring where Sophie had once built her dam with the invisible help of Ree.

He left the water and worked his darkening way toward Elderberry. He had a horror upon him of finding himself in the place where Bonnie lay—with the red coat beside her. He did not know what had been done or whether she had been taken away.

Bonnie held herself aloof presently from his tense mind. The ground was floored to silence by sand and pine needles; the trees did not move their star-enchanted boughs. Even the fallen branches were soggy, and the live ones muted or limbered by the recent rain. His passage was as silent as a wind-moved

shadow. He saw the lights of Elderberry and came to a full stop.

He must now go to that man and ask for shelter. He must swallow pride, jealousy, and fear. Just then a voice spoke down to him from the terrace of the house itself.

"Is that you, Blaise LeClerc?"

He found himself beneath the coping of the terrace where the wet roses still bloomed, and there, against the stars, he could see the tall head of his prospective host. He had not time or ability for clear thought. He climbed through the gap, and a long hand closed about his arm.

"Sophie told me you would be here. How near are they?"

"I can't say—not within hearing. They'll be coming from my house, if they come this way—with hounds."

"Then we must find a safe hiding place for you. Take off your shoes. Give them to me. Lucky that there has been so much rain. Step on these stones—can you see them? I don't want to show a light. Now up this flight of steps. We are going to the main floor by way of the balcony. The utility rooms, kitchen, and so forth lie below, behind that lattice. It had rotted partly away and I've had it repaired. Right! Now—into the dining room through this door. I'll lock it. There is no one in the house but you and me. I have sent Peter to the town for news. He is more than likely with that pack of animals. But this is of no importance. Now we are in the front hall—which, of course, you will remember."

"Yes," Blaise muttered. He felt a weight on his mind and body like the slavery of chains. The light from the chandelier above dazzled him; the stairs down which he and Sophie had once run so gaily rose into darkness. Facing him was the portrait of the Elder boy, whose

name he had never known. But its likeness to Duncan was evidence of relationship if not of identity.

"We must not waste our time," Elder said. He wore a loose black velvet coat above a white shirt and black trousers, old pumps on his feet. He had all his usual composure and seemed to have prepared himself thoroughly for Blaise's arrival.

"I am certain that they will take my word for it that you have not come to this house. But if they should not, if they should insist upon a search, it seems to me that the last place where you could be concealed and where they would hardly take the hounds would be my own bedroom. So I will take you there. You may stay in the room comfortably if you like, but keep your ears open. If there is any sound of arrival, voices of men or dogs, you had better get into the closet. It is a deep one, unlighted, and back against its wall beyond the bar that holds my clothing you will be quite invisible to any but the most intensive search, which is unlikely."

Blaise went up the stairs. He told himself, *The man would not be helping me if . . . if that proves anything. I can't think clearly . . . I must try not to think . . . I should thank him . . . I can't . . . I can't. . . .* He heard himself at the same time stammering a phrase of gratitude.

"Thank Sophie," Duncan said in a tone that might have been one of faint irony. "Don't turn on the lights. Keep quiet. Stay close to the closet door—you see it. Is that clear? It's not uncomfortable here. There's an armchair. But don't go to sleep."

"Not likely."

"And if they come, be sure that I can handle them to my own purpose."

Elder went out, closed, and, to Blaise's faint surprise, locked the door. *Why should he do that? And he has my shoes. . . .* But all his thoughts now seemed to

slide quickly away before he had even understood them fully, out of his mental grasp smoothly like running water, impossible to detain or to remember. He dropped into a chair and bent his head to his hands, pressing the palms against his temples. He was nothing . . . he was nobody . . . except a listener.

Duncan Elder went to his workroom, left the door open, and sat down before his desk. The row of plants on the long window bench were now of various heights. Some had withered, a few pots had been emptied and turned upside down, in one place a little regiment of slips was growing to irregular heights, one tall and spindling, another short and stocky in vigorous green leaf. Duncan took out his slender tool and began to write.

It is extraordinary how entirely quiet this house is tonight. Since the completion of *his* death I have had a sense of integration and of freedom that I—not quite consciously—have missed since the beginning of my mission here. Its success is almost assured. It will be entirely when I have finished testing out the soils and assured myself of the possibility of transplantation to our climate. At the end of this quiet day the last slight chance of my involvement as the master of Elderberry will be removed. As so often happens with me, in fact, with all our people, the intelligence foresees and takes advantage of every favorable incident. . . . The self-destruction of this restless survivor, Elderberry's heir, brought about by his horror of my act—even though I had mistaken the identity of my victim—has been complete. There was not much life left in him, certainly, but what there was of independent fire died as surely as that girl last night. It now remains to close the case, to assure myself of the validity of my specimens, and to return. My report, because of the extraordinary

threat of the partial survival of my host, will be of immense value to all future experiments in our selected area. *I have won!*

His hand paused and was lifted. He had heard voices in the night.

He returned the book to its drawer, the tool to his pocket, and went out into the hall. There was no sound from the refugee upstairs in the dark second story, but from outside a rising and consultative murmur and suddenly, startling the pulses, a deep baying from the hounds. Not five minutes later voices and steps came closer, stopped.

Duncan went over to the closet at the foot of the stairs, and to be armored against the chill dampness of the night put on his long coat. Into its pocket he had slipped the silk handkerchief found by him in the woods, which had served his purpose well. Not waiting for a summons, he stepped out onto his columned porch, switching on, as he did so, a light above his head. Behind him he closed the heavy door.

Below the three shallow steps a group of men, not more than a dozen, had come to a stop and were looking up at him. The light fell across their white faces and the darkness of their bodies. Their flashlights played waveringly against the night. The eyes of the hounds glistened, and their tails moved with an aspect of eagerness and of goodwill. Their tongues hung out and clicked anxiously.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Duncan. "What can I do for you?"

"We're right sorry to disturb you, Mr. Elder, but we surely got to inquire concerning something of importance."

"It has to do, I surmise, with the crime committed

on my property last night, the body of the girl having been found near the wood lane."

"Yes, sir. I don't know what you've heard, but there's mighty con-clusive evidence found on the spot. No footprints, account of the type of ground, pine needles layin' mighty heavy on the sand and rain comin' down later. But there was a coat—"

"I have heard about the coat. In fact, I would have recognized it myself. I've seen it on the young man often."

"Yes, sir. So have we all. We're out to get that boy. He's made a run for it, and I reckon his guilt is right heavy on him. We are concerned to catch him and carry him to police headquarters before they allow him —bein' slow in their precautionary proceedings, with examination of the grounds, etcetera—to make a sure enough getaway. Of course we know he'll be caught sooner or later."

"Cut it short, Jenkyns," someone now suggested, and they pressed closer. Jenkyns put out his hand to hold them. "Take it easy, boys," he said. "I know what I'm about better'n some of you. Now, Mr. Elder, please sir, what we want from you is just to tell us—have you heard or seen sight or sound of Blaise LeClerc or any unknown body this evenin', sir? Has he to your knowledge, or to any hearsay knowledge brought to you, come through your grounds or got himself concealed somewhere hereabouts? This here's a right large property and a large ramblin' sort of old house. It'd offer plenty of hideouts for a desperate man. The dogs here lost his scent down yonder close to your brook, but it does seem as if he was sure enough comin' up this way."

Duncan spoke quietly. "No need to waste your breath in explanations, Mr. Jenkyns," he said, and came to the top of the steps to look gravely down into

their lifted faces. "Your man is here. I have taken him into custody and locked him up. If you will come with me, I will now lead you to him. Tie up your hounds, if you please."

A sound of deathly menace and of deathly purpose rose, low and confused, from the forward-moving men. No hint there of any intention to protect a prisoner from lawless violence or from a too-easy escape. If they were to take him, in fact, to the police, there would not be, Duncan thought, much left of him upon delivery.

But if this betrayal of a murderous purpose did reach Duncan's comprehension it did not concern him. His own plan was of a mathematical precision and of extraordinary importance. He turned and walked toward the front door, the others following. The faces of the men had a queer look of hunger; some of them moistened their lips or wiped them with their hands. Duncan's back was to them, and they saw him lay his hand on the great metal knob of the door. He stood there waiting for them while Bulkie tied his hounds to one of the trees, then joined the others. Bulkie's face exulted; his big hands opened and closed at his sides.

Duncan stood facing the door and drew himself up slowly to his full height, as though an interior spring had been released. Slowly at last he turned. And the men fell back, those in the rear stumbling down the steps into the driveway. For it seemed to them that they were confronted by a stranger. Of course this must be Duncan Elder, who else? They had often seen him moving serenely about the little town, attending church, going in and out of stores, speaking with grave formal politeness—indeed he was the same man in outline and feature, but now, on that still face, there was a white blaze of life, the eyes were widely opened, young: and moving toward them to the very edge of

the porch, he spoke. His warm, frank voice rang strongly.

"I can't take you to Blaise LeClerc. He's not the man you want. He did not kill Bonnie Lou Hicks. *I am your man.*"

Someone broke a stunned silence. "Look out for him, boys. He's mad." They kept moving back from the foot of the steps, staring at him where he now stood close above them. "I killed Bonnie Hicks last night in the Elderberry woods. I strangled her." Here he held out his hands and looked down at them as if they did not belong to him, as if he found them horrible. And that horror was immediately reflected on the faces lifted to him. He put his right hand, as though to hide it, into his loose wide pocket, and someone yelled, "Look out. He's got a gun."

Duncan raised his hands and the men rushed him. They held his arms and felt in his pockets. Bulkie slowly drew out a large silk handkerchief. It was stained and wrinkled, its red roses smeared as though with bloodstains. Everyone knew that scarf. Bulkie sobbed out, "It's hers—it's Bonnie's."

"He's mad, I tell you. Take him to Doc."

They were now running with him down the steps, he offering no resistance, going along almost eagerly. In hard-breathing savage silence he was taken down the driveway, wordlessly suffering the rough treatment of their hands.

"Get him down to the car. We can take him out to Ryan's field—where they dealt with that nigger coupla years ago."

But now there rose contrary voices. "Take it easy, boys. It ain't likely, somehow. There's something wrong about this situation. Better go in and search the house. We might find LeClerc there."

"What'd he give himself up for, then? Why'd he

have that scarf in his pocket? How'd he know the girl was strangled?" And from Bulkie, furiously, "Take him to Doc. He's sure out of his head. Always was sort of cracked. It's LeClerc, I tell you. I keep on tellin' you. It's Blaise. Elder's just tryin' to head us off, give him a chance to make a getaway."

"Then why'd he tell us LeClerc was in there? Why'd he say he'd killed the girl? Think he wants to get himself flogged to death? Why would he do that for a yeller nigger? Come on, Bulkie, we all know you've got it in for LeClerc."

"Oh, shut up, all of you. Let's get this critter into the car before the police get here. Give me that dog whip, Bulkie. We'll have a use for it pretty soon out at the field, I reckon." And they began to move fast and in silence, hurrying their prisoner so that he stumbled, and they struck him and he made no sound.

Halfway down the drive, however, he staggered, and a shock went through his body.

So violent was the spasm that they leaped back as from a lethal voltage. And he shouted clear and loud, as a boy shouts to a conquered bully, *"I win! I win!"* Lifting his face to a star-filled sky, swept free by a strong and sudden wind, "Go back to the judgment of your godless world," he called out, "and"—here his voice went deep and filled itself with yearning—"and may the one Almighty God have mercy on your soul." With that he seemed to leap upward into the air, as a fish leaps to free itself from the hook of an angler. To the stunned observers there was a sensation of something that rushed past them and went up, a sort of brightness, less visible than tactile, an indescribable pressure of cold light, of unseen force. It passed from them. The body of Duncan fell and lay still.

No sound disturbed this stillness until at last Jenkyns whispered, "What got him? Some sort of . . . fit?"

"I reckon we scared him plumb out of his senses."

Jenkyns pointed his flash down at the quiet face, bent over it. He knelt and laid his hand to Duncan's heart, felt his pulse, looked up and rose awkwardly.

"He's dead."

In the stillness that followed the hounds were heard to howl mournfully.

Chapter 15

When the music stops playing and the lights go out, Silence is like a blow in the dark. Such a dark silence had filled Sophie's world during those winter days. Her father had died in his sleep, mercifully before he knew of Duncan's death and of Little Sandy's murder trial. As soon as the verdict was pronounced, "Murder at the hands of Duncan Elder while of unsound mind," Blaise, promising a return, had left Little Sandy to confirm a job opening in Arizona. In the dark loneliness of her recent memories there was one speech that gave both light and music to her life. It had been made during that portion of the inquiry that Sophie had attended. One of the witnesses had said, "When he turned back from the door and came toward us he seemed to be another man. We wouldn't hardly have recognized him."

Of all the horrible evidence only this released her

from an obsessive fear. The warm hands that had held her in the summerhouse, the shining hazel eyes that had looked so closely into her own, the rich mouth that had murmured against hers, "My love . . . my love. . . ." Had these been the tools of rape and murder in the Elderberry night? That icy inhuman figure of her neighbor had seemed to her to be an impossible agent. For what imaginable purpose could Duncan Elder have used those hands, that chained mind and body, for a demon's work? Wrestling forever helplessly with this conundrum, she could not eat or sleep, at times she could not breath.

But—"When he turned back from the door and came toward us," Jenkyn's soft and drawling voice broke in upon her nightmare, "he seemed to be another man. We wouldn't hardly have recognized him." And that man Sophie knew. That man was Ree. It was Ree. And he had saved Blaise from betrayal for her sake, and for the sake of truth, surrendering his own helpless body to death by torture at the hands of angry men. He had confessed to an impossible crime for her sake, defying his tyrant, condemning him also to death. There was that shaft of light, that strain of music, but the bewilderment remained. She could not understand the role of the master. The crime appeared foreign to this cool observer of human lust and frenzy, this scorner of man's passion, of his degraded "love." Once, to be sure, she had herself threatened him with the possibility of his involvement, but that was merely a poker play without any conviction of her own as to his guilt. She remembered too well how violently he had reacted to any human touch, to any woman's touch. No, the crime was an insoluble mystery.

Again and again through Jenkyn's eyes she saw the confessor who came to the edge of the steps and took the crime upon himself, giving his body to death.

In him she recognized the untouched beauty of her "prisoner," who now was free. And her heart seemed to take wings for the rapture of his liberty. Free forever —and forever lost to her "in this her life." But never lost to memory, to her gratitude or to her love. So she was able to move about the quiet house as though in his company, at peace.

On one of these long, lonely afternoons, during Hattie's temporary absence, Sophie, in her black dress, came to the door at the sound of a knock. She looked up into the handsome face of Elderberry's servant, so far above her.

"Peter! Come in. I'm glad to see you."

He was dressed in a dark inverness and carried under its cape a package. His princely air seemed accentuated by this garb. He bent his head and entered the little hall.

"I am about to leave Little Sandy, madam," he said, in the correct English speech with its faint guttural undertones of Africa. "And I have come to bid you good-bye."

Sophie smiled at him, brightening the narrow place.

"You must be glad to go. I know I will be. Won't you come in, sit down?"

"You are planning, then, to go away?"

"Blaise LeClerc's mother and Mr. Hildreth have found a home for me in Arizona."

"That is good. I can stay only a minute. I would have left before, but was constrained to wait for the outcome of the trial and its verdict. If there had been any doubt I would have been bound to produce this"—here he took from under his arm a narrow parcel—"in evidence incontrovertible that would have confirmed a verdict of insanity, but which, for me, had different connotations."

"Different . . . ?" And Sophie stood again in the cold shadow of indescribable foreboding.

"I am about to leave with you this record, to keep or to destroy or to use as you see fit. It has to a considerable extent to do with you, for which reason I withheld it until I could be sure of the vindication of this young man, your friend. But now—it must be yours."

She took the parcel into her hands and felt that it was a volume, very light.

"It is *his* journal. I had manipulated the lock of his desk drawer some time before the end. My suspicion, my conviction, would have been incredible to anyone, but I was watchful. I was able to take this record on the night of his arrest. I had freed Mr. LeClerc before the police arrived, and as you know, he went immediately to headquarters . . . that is"—the manservant bowed gravely—"after I had discovered and returned his shoes . . . and gave himself up. Thereafter I went to the workroom and removed this piece of evidence."

Sophie said, "Please come in. I—I would like to sit down."

Bending low, he followed her, the living room shrinking about him. Sophie dropped into her father's chair and lifted her white face and darkened eyes. He did not take a chair but towered above her.

"When you have read this document you will understand. The man you knew as Duncan Elder was not the lad I knew in Africa. I had known him as a child and had seen him again for a short time before he set out on that fatal expedition, and when he reappeared at the port where we were to meet, after having been given up for dead, I began to suspect that this was not indeed my young master. What then happened in the jungle? *He* used the Elder background cleverly,

the African childhood and youth of his . . . *prisoner,* in order to explain his obvious peculiarities; that, and the supposed effect of his jungle experience. Ah, Miss Graeme, he was adept, skillful. He used me who knew him—*almost*—for what he was. And though he did suspect me of some curiosity concerning him, he was far from guessing my full suspicion. It was not until I read this report, however, that I realized the importance of this revelation, its importance to the modern world. Whether or not my small charm has had for you any protective value against this—influence, I cannot say, but I placed it in that belief. I hope that you will pardon me." He bowed over her hand while she tried in her bewilderment to thank him for some unimaginable service.

"I may . . . you wish me . . . to read this?" she stammered.

"Most certainly, madam. It is clear. It will speak for itself. I am delivering it as a last service to a boy—a beautiful soul—whom I deeply loved."

With that he released her hand and she followed him to the door. He left it open while he bent his elegant and civilized body to take out from under the sill, in a small space between it and the floorboards of the porch, a tiny package done up in some sort of skin, animal or human.

"You will not need this, madam. It will return with me to Africa, that other world as distant from your knowledge as . . . another star. Good-bye, and may the mighty Magnus, your God and mine, now and forever, be with you."

He moved away down the little path and, going, seemed to dwarf her world.

It was a chill afternoon with that frosty wet smell of coming snow, but Sophie, warmly coated, left the house with the book under her arm and made her way as

though under command across the stile to her neglected summerhouse. A sad and withered summerhouse it looked as she came toward it along that haunted allée under the glossy green holly and the leafless white-berried dogwood branches. It was afternoon, not late, but there was no sun, and the gray suspense of her mind seemed to deepen the cloudy dimness of the sky. More and more slowly she walked, and even at the threshold paused, half turned for escape. But this impulse she conquered, went in and sat down on the familiar bench.

She drew a deep hard breath, took up the volume, and held it between her cold hands on her knee. And she thought to herself in the careful speech of conscious thought, *I have already lived through an unearthly horror and an unearthly joy. I'll never be able to speak of these things to a living soul. I've been to some strange country and I've talked there with strangers. Though no one would believe it, I know that they were real, and that makes me afraid. If I read this book I may return to that place, to those strangers, and I might not be able to come back. I might lose myself forever. . . .* Her brows drew together and her fingers went white around the volume. *It would be better to take it home and to burn it without even looking at the first words. . . .* And with that she sat up straight, her eyes wide, and she opened the book in her hands and read.

The beautiful fine handwriting ran even and clear. Never had she seen such exquisite pen-etching. There in the waning light and the cold air she read, and reading, she forgot her life and all its meanings, everything else in the whole universe.

In order to refresh my memory and to clarify my understanding of this penal colony and its

inhabitants, I will commence this journal by a review of my own knowledge, formerly as well as recently acquired.

Until I was selected for this research, I had given little thought to the situation I find on this planet. With us until recently it has had merely historical importance, their plant of passion having been so long stamped out and its addicts banished. But with this mysterious and desperate threat to *our* plant's survival, everything here, where the climate and the soil are so similar to ours, has become vitally important. For myself I have been profoundly interested in what I have observed in this microcosm.

Certainly it is from his sure foreknowledge of death that the earth man has drawn the material for all his emotions and his beliefs: his loves, his fears, his hatreds, his heroisms and his worship. The God of resurrection is his assurance—his only assurance—of survival, the promised one of spirit, but not a human survival.

We, of course, being positively free of that certainty of death, have found the answers. After we had allowed the incompetent to die naturally, we then distributed the fruit of the tree to the most promising survivors, insuring immortality.

By this release from the fear of death we have freed ourselves from all pain, from sickness, crime, agony, birth. We have destroyed the animal lust as well as the yearning for a love of which no creature, in either of our worlds, is capable. The love of an animal is always lust. As long as they sicken and die they are animals, as long as they grieve and pray and cringe and weep, as long as they suffer and give pain—even to those they say they "love," they are only animals.

With us there is no love, no hate, no pain, no anger—only thought and clarity. Not Nirvana—that is one of their desperate attempts. For

Nirvana is nothingness, a rejection, not only of feeling, but of thought and will. For us, in our togetherness, we continue to think, to invent, to dissect and to improve. We accept our own choice of reality and live with it. They, on the contrary, have confused themselves with myths and legends, tales misunderstood.

Their Savior, who has saved them from nothing because they are not capable of His salvation, was not only theirs. He has been sent to all the many mansions. They killed Him, as we did. His love, his immortality, was not for us, as it is not for them. They have tried to accept it and they have failed. They believe that it was their special revelation, that He was their Christ who died for them. He died for us too, but we gave Him shorter shrift in cyclic death. We had already advanced by our own wisdom beyond His teaching. We had found an easier, a scientific immortality, which did not insist upon a death of the body and a rebirth into another dimension—another "kingdom." We knew ourselves as that Father could not know us. They call Him all-knowing, all-loving, but He is not their God. They have many gods, made of fear and of distorted memories. Let me recall their history.

There is that memory of Paradise and of the eating of the forbidden fruit, of a man and a woman expelled by an angry God. And from this memory they have acquired an everlasting sense of sin and condemnation, a flight from God, a shame, a groveling of confession and of punishment. They ate of the "tree of knowledge of good and evil." They never realized that it was an aphrodisiac, which can increase the natural animal lust to a furious intensity. Their myth remembers vaguely the expulsion of many guilty souls, but this has been personified in their records as one man and one woman, the original sinners, Adama

and Ueva. This world in which they live has been a place of exile.

The men and women who ate of the plant of passion, the lust plant that transforms the natural animal desires of men to a madness of hate, murder, cruelty, were banished lest they discover the other plant—of life. For this has properties of which they as yet know nothing.

It is possible that this plant of life may have seeds here—such is our hope and our necessity—to find which is the purpose of my all-important mission. This plant of life has many properties. It has the power to destroy all decay of mind and body. So our great ruler, himself surviving from the mist of the first struggle, set himself to kill out the plant of passion and to cultivate the plant of physical immortality. For many generations we immortals have lived like the gods these earth creatures imagined for their envy, in a land where there is no birth, no infancy, no helpless, distorted childhood, no passion between male and female bodies, no need for pity or for punishment, no tyranny of hate or of love. No love.

Since there was no more need for exile, the infected ones having long since been exterminated from our world, we have been allowed to visit the earth for research and investigation. To do this is difficult enough, a supreme test, possible only to a few experts. Sometimes they have discerned our clumsiest attempts—phantoms, ghosts, who knows what else?—split personalities, a guardian angel or so at the best. But with very special skill it is possible to take one of their dying bodies at the very point of death and to fill it with our own being.

I was fortunate in making an immediate contact. As soon as I entered the cone of the earth's shadow I directed my course to the African jungle area, since it seemed to me the likeliest climate

for the surviving growth if it was to be found at all on this planet. And almost at once, my instruments detected the nearness of a dying body. It was not far distant. The young man lay close to a smoldering fire around which squatted a group of naked black men waiting for the end. They thought, I suppose, that they would soon be able to make off with accoutrements of some value, for there was a sort of greed in their pose and fearful patience. I was, of course, not visible to them, but I saw a shiver pass over them as I approached, and at the instant of the white man's last gasping breath, when I skillfully took possession of his emaciated body, which leaped once, then lay still, they must have guessed some mystery, felt my presence, for like a flock of startled birds they were gone. They left the coveted belongings, taking only their weapons, and fled, silent and quick, into the night.

It took me some time to instruct my awkwardness in the management of my host, his limbs and senses and the movements of his brain. The trek to port was a most difficult and even dangerous experience, as I had the perils to his flesh to protect by the usage of powers as yet not well adjusted to this task. I was fortunate to find in the port on my arrival (I was guided there, of course, by the dying intention of my host) the man Peter, who had been the dead one's body servant and knew him well. My obvious condition was explanation enough to him and others of faulty memory, confusion, ignorance; and Peter knew the name of my host's destination, had all the necessary tickets, reservations, the plan of the journey, and even the money that would be needed for the trip. I had only to affect extreme debility and to rely upon him, gradually informing myself as to the name and history of my prisoner, whose obedience was abject, a revelation that convinced me of my

entire success in this delicate operation and gave me considerable and not uninteresting employment for my wit.

By the time our long, quiet journey came to its end in this small southern town, I was fairly well at home with Duncan Elder and he had begun to be a very limber tool. Without the help of Peter I might have found my adjustment very difficult, though not, of course, impossible. One discovery especially intrigued me. Young Elder, I gathered, was romantic; his journey, as their poet expresses it, was to end in "lovers meeting." He had never set eyes on this Sophie Graeme, but I gathered from Peter that she had always been his "ideal woman." Poor blinded animal! He was drawn to her by an incredible and it would seem an overmastering desire. I am curious about this female creature, having so vague a memory of woman as a different and distinct being, an object of lust or of its dressed-up fellow, romantic love.

There followed many pages of notes on plants and animals, and a few on the people he had analyzed on his journey from Africa to this new world. Sophie's attention leaped to his early references to the inhabitants of Little Sandy.

This Sophie is not like anything I have known. She is perhaps a phantom memory of someone—perhaps of my own mother in the centuries before I, amongst the other chosen ones, was given to eat of the plant of life. Fruit of lust as she is, and alive with its allurement to her own kind, there is something else. I can find no name for it. There is a similar mystery in the face and the eyes of children. These are extraordinary beings. I have even found myself wondering if we may not have deprived ourselves of something of value. There is

one little boy here who has attached himself to me....

The young man Blaise LeClerc is as rank as an ill-smelling weed with lust. She, in her ignorance of her own flesh, will not discover this until too late. That look in her eyes, as though she belonged neither to our world nor to theirs, will vanish, too delicate to survive his animal touch, as it will vanish from the wonder-eyes of little Ned. Is this something we have thrown away unknowingly—we, in our scientific freedom, our exact victory over the flesh, and they too, in their dread intoxication with the fruit of their chosen tree?

Such questions are new to me, forgotten in my world but not without interest, and here of a certain definite importance to my own adventure.

The pages turned delicately, noiselessly, under Sophie's trembling fingers.

... I have forced her confidence. She is turning to me. To watch the struggle fascinates me, as she strives vainly to throw off my control. Also fascinating to watch that other struggle of a dying man against the gradual approach of his own death.

Here the lonely reader felt a creeping of her flesh as cold of the beginning of an illness, remembering as she must that patient watcher at her father's bedside, that lighted, dying face. She riffled the pages back and forth, picking up passages as she felt able to bear their contents.

... she is deceiving him, that ignominy of sin is upon her like some ugly parasite. The wretch is consumed by what she calls her "love" for Conrad Graeme (what roots have nourished *that* illu-

sion?) and by the lust for a man's abuse and a mother's slavery. Her body calls for "love," the "ecstasy of self-surrender, the glory of giving." How they fool their bewildered souls, misnaming misery! So she will deceive her selfish father, who is himself consumed, I take it, by a secret sense of sin, and she will give her body and its momentary youth and beauty to this young animal who will soon lose the temporary gloss of his own delusion. . . . And her child will feed upon her weakness with blind cruelty. Better any fate than theirs. . . . From such a one, deliver me!

Sophie was no longer cold. The book in her hand played upon her blood, turning it to fire with hatred, horror, shame—a writhing.

She tried to stop reading—let fall the book, only to pick it up again, managed to neglect a few entries but was captured again, reading here and there, frozen to to the page.

. . . one person only has brought the circumstance to my attention . . . the child Sophie . . . but before her curious account . . . there had been one evening in the woods alone when I seemed to miss . . . something. . . .

Her eyes skimmed the lines, picking up words and phrases disconnectedly, as though she could hardly bear the images they evoked. After a long hiatus there came suddenly this—which went through her nerves like an electric shock.

There is great danger here. There have been intrusions. Sophie has become aware. . . . *Impediments must be removed.*

She felt the approach of some unexpected revela-

tion and found it difficult to read on. But she subdued her tremors and took up the book again, opening it almost at random. The page before her was half covered by the usual script, but across it there leaped to her eyes these strong black, sprawling words: *"I AM ALIVE."*

She sprang up and paced the dim room, her hands pushing her hair back from her temples. Cold tears poured down her face.

"I am alive," she said aloud to the listening woods, "I am alive"—confused and sobbing—"but he is dead. But he is dead."

She returned to her bench and forced herself to read.

> If I can evoke his loathing for his own existence, his hatred of consciousness . . . that appalling guilt-sense, self-inflicted, suicidal, the strong memory, surviving in exile, of discovered lust and ruthless punishment . . . My tool! He will be broken to my uses. He will be driven back to his cell beneath my consciousness, condemned to psychic death. For I can leave his body at will . . . but for him there is no possible escape, unless . . . he can drive *me* out . . . me . . . the Messenger! If I could pity I believe I might learn to pity even him . . . Adama . . . damned.

The story was nearing its end; there were blank pages ahead. There was no stopping possible; her eyes were frozen to the written words; her dreadful comprehension grew.

> He must recognize his victim, at that return of awareness, as the ideal woman of his romantic love.

Here a faintness came over the reader and the walls

of the summerhouse whirled around her. She was remembering that late visit of Duncan's to her father's bedside and the fact that upon her return she had found her sleeping invalid alone. Duncan had followed her out, he had been waiting for her, Sophie, in the lane. . . . *Oh, Bonnie . . . Bonnie!* She forced her mind to come back, her eyes to clear. The record had nearly reached its close.

> . . . At the end of this quiet day the last slight chance of my involvement as the master of Elderberry will be removed. . . . My error in the person of the girl, which at first so dismayed me, was fortunate. If he had realized that his horrid deed had been perpetrated against the body of his ideal love, his own body might have died utterly in that convulsion, and I forced out into space . . . The self-destruction of this restless survivor, Elderberry's heir, brought about by his horror of my act . . . has been complete. There was not much life left in him, certainty, but what there was of independent fire died as surely as that girl last night. It now remains to close the case, to assure myself of the validity of my specimens, and to return. My report, because of the extraordinary threat of the partial survival of my host, will be of immense value. . . . *I have won!*

The strange, thin-leaved book lay open on the floor. Sophie was on her knees, as she had once been discovered by the recording messenger, her arms along the bench, her head against her arms. The echo of those closing words came to her in another voice, *"I win! I win!"* and that cry of victory gave wings even to the horror and the grief.

She remembered her first vague recognition of the

prisoner in Duncan Elder's colorless gray eyes, that mute plea for help, for rescue; she remembered the first swift apparition—that change of face, of eyes, of mouth, the sudden warmth; she remembered all those transient lights and ripples of struggling consciousness, vanishing, recurrent—lost. Above all she remembered the strong young arms, the shining hazel eyes, the murmur of his "love" his "love," and she spoke to him now softly over and over, thanking him and rejoicing for him. He needed her help no longer.

The cold dark air came closer and seemed to touch her neck with icy fingers, but she was lost in that other world. She had no name, she was neither child nor woman, she did not know or care who or what she was, nor what she was not, she was a part of a world undiscovered by the conscious mind of man.

The large wet flakes of snow fell upon her and upon the book that lay open on the rotting boards. Where the flakes touched that writing vanished and the delicate material shriveled and melted away. When Sophie stood up and went out, dazed and weak, only half conscious, she saw the snow, a wet and heavy fall so thick that only the nearest trees were visible to mark her path down to the brook. She had gone about a hundred steps when a muffled crash behind her made her turn. She remembered that she had left the journal on the floor. She ran, slipping and stumbling. The roof of the summerhouse had broken under the heavy sudden snow, and half of the latticed wall lay all across the floor. Her volume was buried in a mass of boards and branches of long-collected pine needles, of dirt and snow. Impossible for her to dig her way to it.

Half blinded, she returned with soundless, difficult steps to the stile. It was unlikely that anyone would ever revisit the summerhouse, and if a future owner of Elderberry should clear the pile of rubbish away,

there would be left of that open volume only a shriveled pulp, its message illegible. Lost. Well lost.

She reached the stile, and at its top she paused and looked up at the trees, gigantic, veiled in a tremulous mist of snow. And three times she said that little name in a murmur of farewell. Then she went down and out into the world.

The little house was lighted in all its windows. And she began to run. For Blaise was coming toward her. He had come home. He would carry her to Arizona, to his mother, to her new home. He would take her to that sun-filled land, to share with him the joy and the aching, the wonder and the uncertainty, the laughter and the richness of life together.

And never again in all her warm and eager life would she return, except in dreams and memory, to the terror and the peace, to the beautiful and haunted woods of Elderberry.

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